

# ***Puthi-Pora*: ‘Melodic Reading’ and its Use in the Islamisation of Bengal**



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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on *puthi-pora*, a Bengali tradition of book and manuscript reading. It pursues two central aims. The first is ethnographic: to document and describe *puthi-pora* as it is performed today in Sylhet, Bangladesh. The second is historical: to shed light on a historical mystery—how Islam spread so rapidly and pervasively in Bengal from the sixteenth century. My hypothesis is that *puthi-pora* was used in this process.

Cognitive schema theory is my overarching methodology. It has been applied in two ways. First, I use the schema concept to analyse a whole performance event, using, as primary data, the fieldnotes of two observers: mine as a cultural outsider, and those of my research assistant who is of Bengali descent. This provides a conceptual basis for describing the processes involved in constructing my ethnography, and generates a holistic and schematic framework of *puthi-pora* that is used for comparing the details of this, and other performance occasions. I also view each performance as a ‘historical document’, and consider, in the details of the emerging ethnography, what it *is* about *puthi-pora* that *would* have made it such a powerful vehicle for Islamisation. Second, I use the schema concept to analyse the two principal tune-types used in *puthi-pora*. This has resulted in the generation of a model for creating melodic schemas that demonstrates a way of representing the essence of a melody (and its variations) in a concise form, and illustrates the processes involved in their reconstruction.

In conclusion, I present a new definition of *puthi-pora* and a prototypical description of the tradition as practised in Muslim Sylhet. I suggest that present-day performances can be used as historical documentation, as shown in the way that *puthi-pora* has shed light on the processes involved in the Islamisation of Bengal, thus, in part, helping to demystify the historical mystery.

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## List of Audio Examples

The following audio examples (in MP3 format) can be found on the CD in the pocket attached to the inside back cover of this thesis. They supplement the analysis of *pyar* and *tripodī* tunes in chapter 5. The MP3 file names on the CD (e.g. P1\_JNAL) refer to the example numbers in chapter 5 and their tune-type (e.g. P1 = *Poyar 1*), the *puthi* and the *puthi*-reader (e.g. JNAL = *Jongo Nama*, read by *Abdul Lotif*). I have included the length of each example below, and the page number to which they relate. Each example presented is the full length of the original recording. I have left them as they are so as to provide the maximum context for the melodic analysis.

No.	MP3 File	Description	Length	Page
1	P1_JNAL	Abdul Lotif's Jongo Nama Poyar	(00:09:43)	183
2	P2_JNAK	Abdul Korim's Jongo Nama Poyar	(00:05:03)	186
3	P3_JNMA	Montazil Ali's Jongo Nama Poyar	(00:04:36)	190
4	P4_MNAL	Abdul Lotif's Mohobbot Nama Poyar	(00:02:35)	207
5	P5_MNAK	Abdul Korim's Mohobbot Nama Poyar	(00:05:44)	210
6	P6_MNMA	Montazil Ali's Mohobbot Nama Poyar	(00:07:41)	215
7	P7_HNMA	Montazil Ali's Halotun Nobi Poyar	(00:11:37)	241
8	P8_HNBA	Boshir Ahmed's Halotun Nobi Poyar	(00:20:11)	245
9	P9_HNAK	Abdul Korim's Halotun Nobi Poyar	(00:06:19)	248
10	T1_JNAK	Abdul Korim's Jongo Nama Tripodī	(00:04:27)	195
11	T2_JNMA	Montazil Ali's Jongo Nama Tripodī	(00:01:24)	201
12	T3_MNAL	Abdul Lotif's Mohobbot Nama Tripodī	(00:02:40)	221
13	T4_MNAK	Abdul Korim's Mohobbot Nama Tripodī	(00:04:21)	225
14	T5_MNMA	Montazil Ali's Mohobbot Nama Tripodī	(00:05:07)	232
15	T6_HNMA	Montazil Ali's Halotun Nobi Tripodī	(00:07:40)	252
16	T7_HNAK	Abdul Korim's Halotun Nobi Tripodī	(00:04:48)	255
17	T8_HNBA	Boshir Ahmed's Halotun Nobi Tripodī	(00:09:03)	258

## Transliteration Scheme

This transliteration scheme for Bengali and Sylheti was created by Sylheti Translation and Research. To those who are familiar with other transliteration schemes used for South Asian languages, it will be immediately apparent that the inherent vowel in Bengali and Sylheti has been transliterated here as ‘o’ rather than ‘a’. This has been done so as to correctly represent the pronunciation.

### Vowels

<i>Full Form</i>		<i>Symbol + ‘k’</i>	
Bengali	Sylheti	Bengali	Sylheti
অ o		ক ko	
আ a	া a	কা ka	দা ka
ই i	হ i	কি ki	দী ki
ঈ ī		কী kī	
উ u	ভ u	কু ku	দ্য ku
ঊ ū		কূ kū	
ঋ ṛ		ক্ kṛ	
এ e	ঐ e	কে ke	দৌ ke
ঐ oi		কৌ koi	
ও ō <sup>1</sup>	ঔ o <sup>2</sup>	কো kō	দা ko
ঔ ou		কৌ kou	

<sup>1</sup> ‘ō’ is usually transliterated ‘o’ rather than ‘ō’. ‘ō’ is preferable, however, as many Bangladeshis now use ‘o’ to represent ‘অ’.

<sup>2</sup> ‘o’ is the inherent vowel in Sylheti, and is assumed to follow any consonant in the absence of a vowel symbol. Therefore, ‘দা’ represents ‘ko’, although the vowel ‘ঔ/o’ is frequently either not pronounced at all or is almost inaudible; when this is the case the vowel will not be transliterated.



In Sylheti, <sup>৳</sup> forms diphthongs ending in *-i*. This feature has no parallel in Bengali.

<i>Full Form</i>			<i>Symbol + 'k'</i>		
(ৱ + হ)	ৱৈ	oi	(দা + হ)	দৌ	koi
(া + হ)	াৈ	ai	(দা + হ)	দৌ	kai
(ভ + হ)	No full form		(দ্য + হ)	দ্যৈ	kui

## Consonants

Bengali		Sylheti		Bengali		Sylheti	
ক	k	দা	k	ত, ৎ	t	ত	t
খ	kh	দা	kh	থ	th	দা	th
গ	g	ম	g	দ	d	দ	d
ঘ	gh	ব	gh	ধ	dh	দা	dh
ঙ	n			ন	n	ম	n
চ	c	ব	c	প	p	দা	p
ছ	ch	দ্র	s	ফ	ph	দা	f
জ	j	জ	j	ব	b	ব	b
ঝ	jh	দ্র	jh	ভ	bh	ক	bh
ঞ	ñ			ম	m	ম	m
ট	ʈ	ত	ʈ	য	ɣ		
ঠ	ʈh	চ	ʈh	য়	y		
ড	ɖ	ড	ɖ	র	r	ব	r
ড়	r	দ্র	r	ল	l	দ	l
ঢ	ɖh	ঢ	ɖh				
ঢ়	ɖh			শ	ʃ		
ণ	ɳ			ষ	ʃ		
				স	s	দা	sh <sup>3</sup>
				হ	h	দা	h

<sup>3</sup> Sylheti only has one letter for 'ś /ʃ/s', pronounced 'sh' as in 'shake'.

## Special Symbols

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<i>Symbol + 'ka/k'</i>	
Bengali	Sylheti
কাং kam	দাঁ kan
কাঃ kaḥ	

<i>Symbol + 'ka/k'</i>	
Bengali	Sylheti
কাঁ kã	
ক্ k	দাঁ <sup>4</sup> k <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sylheti Translation and Research (STAR) have not seen examples of the use of the Sylheti 'hasanta' in any Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*, only in reading primers. When it is used, it represents the suppression of the inherent vowel, as in Bengali.

*For Angela*

## Introduction

*Puthi-poṛa* is the focus of this study; it is represented as such by its solitary presence in the main title. A *puthi* is a ‘book or manuscript’; *poṛa* simply means, ‘to read or to recite’. Taken together, *puthi-poṛa* can be translated as, ‘book or manuscript reading’; although this does not reveal the fact that *puthi-poṛa* is actually a tradition of musical performance. Perhaps this explains why some belittle its musical status, and why it has remained, until now, a largely unknown and unresearched genre of Bengali music. The primary aim of this study is to rectify this, by documenting and describing *puthi-poṛa* as it is performed today in Sylhet, Bangladesh, and by attempting to produce an emically-derived, etically-sustainable definition of the tradition that takes into account its performance context, content, and use of melody. This ethnographic aim is implied by including ‘melodic reading’ at the beginning of the subtitle—words which express the etic-emic essence of its performance.

The second part of the subtitle, ‘...and its use in the Islamisation of Bengal’, indicates, not only the historic-geographical context in which this study is set, but that *puthi-poṛa* had a dynamic role in the processes involved. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that *puthi-poṛa* was used as a vehicle to spread and to root Islam in Bengal, but this is not made sufficiently clear in the existing literature. The secondary aim of this study, then, is to address this omission: first, by stating as a hypothesis that *puthi-poṛa* was used in the Islamisation of Bengal; second, testing this hypothesis by asking what it *is* about the tradition that would have made it so powerful a vehicle for Islamisation. The two aims of this thesis, ethnographic and historical, are interwoven throughout. As different aspects of the tradition are described, they are also discussed in the light of the hypothesis.

Of course, what is presented here is the culmination of years of research. I did not begin with the two aims outlined above; in fact, had I pursued my original plan for

this doctorate, it would have led to quite a different thesis! To explain how I arrived at this juncture, I offer a ‘natural history’ of the research which outlines its background (‘before fieldwork’), my methods of data collection (‘doing fieldwork’), and methods of data analysis (‘after fieldwork’). This is followed by an explanation of the structure of the thesis, and concludes with a section acknowledging those whom have helped to make this research possible.

### *Before Fieldwork: Background to the Research*

My interest in *puthi-pora* goes back several years. In the summer of 1999, during my undergraduate degree in Music at the University of Wales, Bangor, I attended some of the events staged by the Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival in London. During this time of exposure to the music and culture of a nation of which I had had little personal experience, I learned something about the demographics of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain; in particular that the majority of the three hundred thousand Bangladeshis living in the United Kingdom originate from Sylhet. I also learned that these Sylhetis speak ‘Sylheti’, a dialect of Bengali, together with around ten million (or so) others in the Surma Valley region of north-eastern Bangladesh and south-eastern Assam, India. Sylheti is distinct from Bengali, not just in its vocabulary and grammar, but also in its orthography and script. Herein lay my initial contact with the tradition; for, written in Sylhet’s own script—‘Sylheti-Nagri’—is a corpus of Muslim-authored *puthis*.

At this stage, I was ignorant of the fact that these Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* were an Islamic and regional expression of a much broader religio-linguistic tradition. Having become aware of the distinctiveness of the Sylheti language and script, I was intrigued to know if the music of the region was analogously distinct, too. As they were written in the Sylheti-Nagri script, I assumed that the epic and lyrical songs contained in these *puthis* were uniquely Sylheti, and concluded that they would provide an obvious point of departure for such an investigation. My original intention for this doctoral research, then, was to study ‘Sylheti music’ as ‘a distinct musical language’. To this end, I went to Sylhet between October 2002 and August 2003 for ten months of Sylheti language-learning prior to commencing my first year at SOAS in September 2003.

During this period of language-learning, however, I became aware that *puthis* also existed in Bengali. Although this shattered my illusion of the regional exclusivity of the tradition, it gave me a focus in reviewing the secondary literature. Here (as will

be shown in chapter 1), I learned that contextualised ‘Muslim Bengali literature’ was composed from the sixteenth century. This resulted in a large corpus of Islamic *puthis* which are evidently linked to the process of Islamisation in Bengal. What is not made evident in the histories dealing with this subject, however, is *how* this *puthi* literature was used to communicate Islam to the Bengali masses. It does not require a great leap of logic to link *puthis* with *puthi-pora*—that is, physical ‘texts’ with their ‘reading’—but even though questions such as ‘*how* did Islam spread and take root in Bengal?’ are asked in these historical accounts, *puthi-pora* is not only *not* suggested as an answer, it is not even mentioned by name. Similarly, in the few definitions and descriptions of *puthi-pora* that exist, the issue of its use in the Islamisation of Bengal is neither stated nor inferred. This ‘gap’ in the literature seemed too significant to overlook, and so the direction of my research changed, radically, from a general study of ‘Sylheti music’ to a specific, historical ethnomusicological study and the generation of a hypothesis: that *puthi-pora* was instrumental in the Islamisation of Bengal.

In order to test this hypothesis, I had to learn what it *is* about *puthi-pora* that would have made it so powerful a vehicle for Islamisation. The secondary literature is clear about the significance of pre-Islamic<sup>1</sup> poetic and literary influences on the Islamic *puthi*-texts, but because so little has been written on the performance and performance context of *puthi-pora*, it was obvious that this was an area that needed to be addressed first. My research aims were becoming clear: I would attempt a study of *puthi-pora in the context of* the Islamisation of Bengal. Ethnography would be the central thread—a documentation and description of *puthi-pora*, on its own terms, as it is found today in Sylhet. The historical question would become a secondary (though no-less important) thread, woven throughout the ethnography as an interpretive variable to evaluate the significance of various aspects of the tradition to the hypothesis. With these aims in mind, I returned to Sylhet in January 2005 to begin eight months of fieldwork.

### *Doing Fieldwork: Methods of Data Collection*

Now that I knew *puthi-pora* was not confined to Sylhet, I could have gone elsewhere in Bangladesh (or to other parts of north-east India for that matter). But because of the

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘pre-Islamic’ I mean before the advent of Islam in Bengal, not before Islam. This is how I will use the term throughout this thesis.

Sylheti language-learning I had done, and the contacts I had made, it seemed practical to go back to Sylhet. I also decided to preserve my focus on the *puthis* of the Sylheti-Nagri tradition. This was for two reasons: first, because they constitute a specific, and naturally-limited, data-set (and, therefore, represent a convenient case study); second, because I was not willing to relinquish my initial research interests (as I believed that the Sylheti-Nagri tradition of *puthi-pora* would, in some respects, other than language and script, be distinct from the wider Bengali tradition). In retrospect, this ‘exclusive’ focus led to my making some blinkered decisions about what, and what not, to record (which are acknowledged in chapter 2), and which contacts to pursue or not to pursue. In reality, it was not possible to ignore the prevalence of Bengali *puthi-pora* (even in Sylhet), so the data used in this thesis (regarding performance context, particularly), are actually broader than I had originally intended.

Nevertheless, I was constrained in data collection by the access I had to *puthi*-readers. In the task of locating *puthi*-readers and organising occasions to record them, I readily acknowledge the critical roles played by Mujibur Rahman, Nazrul Islam, and Abdur Rahman. Without the trust of these men, and their willingness to make many, and often fruitless enquires on my behalf, the task would have been, if not impossible, exceedingly more challenging. Yet, because the majority of my contacts were through these men, the scope of the data is limited by their personal spheres of influence. This does not mean, however, that it is unrepresentative; only that generalised conclusions must remain tentative until data are collected from other, geographically wider, areas to be compared with those presented here.

In order to write a representative ethnography, I needed to learn as much about *puthi-pora* as possible. My initial method of data collection, therefore, was ‘synthetic-heuristic’. This involved laying aside certain presuppositions—including the historical hypothesis—to experience naturally-occurring performance events (which is easier to idealise than it is to actualise). My experience was very much as an outsider, however. I chose to observe performances, rather than to participate in them (or some kind of an in-between), and tried to have as little effect on the proceedings as possible. Both for documentary reasons, and because I did not know what was, and was not, integral to the tradition at this stage, I used various media to record performances—audio (DAT;

MP3), visual (digital photographs), audio-visual (Mini DV), and written ('Real-Time Observations'<sup>2</sup> and fieldnotes).

Having access to a limited number of *puthi*-readers also meant that I was able to interview each reader at least once. My intention was always to counterbalance my etic experience of *puthi-pora* with the emic views of the readers themselves. This I did after, and on a separate occasion from the performance event at which I had first observed each *puthi*-reader read. Despite ten months of Sylheti language-learning, my abilities were not sufficient to conduct these interviews myself; at least, I did not want my limitations to limit the potential depth of these data. For this reason, among others, I hired Nazrul Islam—a trilingual, British Sylheti-Muslim<sup>3</sup>—as my research assistant; he conducted the interviews on my behalf. Because I wanted to ask specific questions of the *puthi*-readers regarding the hypothesis, it did not seem suitable to adopt a non-directive approach. Instead, I wrote a general set of questions in English which Nazrul translated impromptu and put to each reader. Where specific issues had been raised in individual performances, these were formulated as questions and asked in addition. I attended every interview but did not want to interrupt the flow by having Nazrul back-translate for me. Besides, I was recording all of the interviews and I had arranged for each one to be transcribed and translated into English through a local company. I was satisfied that I would be able to access the information at a later stage. What I had not fully considered, however, was the time factor between conducting the interviews and receiving the translated transcripts. It was often too late to pursue lines of enquiry once I had access to what was originally said. Nevertheless, the data I have from these interviews are comprehensive.

For personal reasons, Nazrul had to return to London a couple of times during the eight months of my fieldwork. In his absences I took the opportunity to investigate Hindu traditions of book and manuscript reading that could have served as models for the Islamic tradition. Comparing the performances and performance contexts of these two religio-cultural expressions would, I believed, shed light on the hypothesis. My access to Hindu performers came again through Mujibur Rahman, and through Biplob Nandi—a trilingual Sylheti-Hindu—who I hired on a part-time basis as an additional

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<sup>2</sup> My 'Real-Time Observations' (hereafter, RTO) are the notes that I made during specific performance events which were linked to the time-counter on my Tascam DA-P1 DAT recorder.

<sup>3</sup> Nazrul is fluent in Sylheti, Bengali, and English.



research assistant. I approached data collection in the Hindu context in the same way as I did in the Muslim context.

All these activities—locating performers of both Muslim and Hindu traditions, recording them ‘read’, interviewing them, and documenting the process—constituted my ‘doing fieldwork’. In September 2005, I returned from Sylhet with three main data sources: written fieldnotes, interviews, and audio, visual, and audio-visual recordings of performance events.

### *After Fieldwork: Methods of Data Analysis*

Although I returned with some of the translated transcripts from my interviews, I had to wait several months before I received all of them. I decided, therefore, to begin my analysis of the data with my audio-recordings. For reasons that will be explained in chapter 5, I wanted to compare the tunes different *puthi*-readers used to read the same *puthis*. Even before I began my fieldwork, my supervisor, Professor Richard Widdess encouraged me to use ‘schema theory’ as a method for analysing the musical features of *puthi-pora*. This coincided with his particular interest in developing an analytical tool for ethnomusicology, which can explain, and represent, the processes involved in the performance of music in oral traditions. Because schema theory addresses how we think, it has the potential to do just that.

Schema theory was developed in the mid-1970s, across a number of fields, to pursue a range of cognitive enquiries (D’Andrade 1995:122). Naturally, definitions of what a ‘schema’ is, or consists of, vary from discipline to discipline; even from study to study. The unifying idea, however, is that schemas are a type of ‘abstract memory structure’, constructed from repeated individual experience. If we know how to ‘act’ in a certain situation, it is because we have experienced a similar situation in the past. Snyder (2000:97), referencing Schank and Abelson (1977:42, 153), provides a helpful example of such a situation: eating in a restaurant. This schema has a relatively stable sequence of events, such as ordering, eating, and paying the bill. Associated with this schema are a number of elements (or ‘categories’), such as tables, chairs, a waiter or waitress, the bill, the cash-register, and so on. If we are to enjoy a successful dining experience, we need to know what these elements are, and how we must interact with them. All the details may vary considerably—the type of restaurant, its size, whether you book in advance or just turn up, the time of day you go, the occasion, and so on—

and yet still evoke a 'restaurant schema'. 'We are most likely to notice and remember things when they *do not fit exactly* within our schemas,' says Snyder (2000:98), rather than when they *do fit*. 'A waitress in a gorilla suit, for example, would not be a part of our restaurant schema, and would be immediately noticed as being unusual'.

This example well captures two important schematic functions: representation and process. If asked to describe what eating in a restaurant involves, rather than refer to a specific occasion, we might use words similar to those above and describe what is involved in general terms to represent the process. Or, if asked to draw a tree (from memory), it is likely that the resultant drawing would represent the essential elements of a tree—such as a trunk, branches, and leaves—rather than it being a representation of a specific tree. In terms of process, Snyder (2000:95-6) writes

Schemas function as norms or sets of ideas about how things *usually* are, and allow us to move through situations without having to repeatedly consciously evaluate every detail and its meaning: they operate unconsciously to contextualize current experience.

Having a 'restaurant schema', based on the repeated individual experience of going to a restaurant, enables a diner to 'move through' the situation of ordering, eating, and paying, without having consciously to evaluate every detail and its meaning in order to do so. Where the situation is familiar, the experience is largely unconscious. But if something *unusual* occurs, we notice and remember it.

As I began interacting with the schema concept, in terms of its relevance and application to melodic analysis (explained in chapter 5), I was struck with its potential use for analysing whole performance events. On the basis that 'Schemas function as norms or sets of ideas about how things *usually* are,' I decided to examine my written fieldnotes as 'texted experiences', looking for the similarities in my experiences of repeated performance events. Once I had applied schematic analysis to my fieldnotes, I had a ready list of emically-derived categories and schemas ('emic' in the sense that they were derived from actual performances, rather than being the products of etic-predetermination) which I was able to use in the analysis of my translated interview transcripts. The way this was done is explained in chapter 2.

The time involved in this kind of data analysis is extensive, particularly in the process of creating 'melodic schemas'. As the Muslim expression of *puthi-pora* is the focus of this thesis these data inevitably received the most attention. It was simply not possible to analyse the Hindu traditions in the same amount of detail (a consideration

of these data could easily form the basis of another doctorate). Where specific aspects are relevant to the hypothesis, however, I have made some general observations which are offered alongside the main analysis.

### *An Explanation of Thesis Structure*

The ethnographic and historical aims of this thesis and the methodology used in their analysis and explanation are pursued in the following five chapters. Chapter 1 lays the foundation by evaluating existing descriptions of *puthi-pora*, raising issues which are to be discussed in later chapters. It also presents a brief history of the Islamisation of Bengal and considers the influence of Muslim Bengali literature in two key historical phases. Chapter 2 looks in detail at a whole performance event. By combining schema theory with fieldwork methods, my and Nazrul's 'texted experiences' of this event are analysed, and categories and schemas elicited from it. Together, these categories and schemas form a framework for considering specific ethnographic details in chapters 3 and 4, and for discussing their historical relevance. Performance context is the focus of chapter 3. Here, the details of the event analysed in chapter 2 are compared with the details of other performance events and evaluated alongside interview data. These details are then considered further in relation to the hypothesis. Chapter 4 steps back from the specific context of performance to look at the *puthis* themselves. Issues such as the authority of the *puthi*-literature and the significance of language and script are discussed here, along with a consideration of different *puthi*-types, their authors, contents, and poetic metres. Having identified the poetic metres used in one of these *puthi*-types, chapter 5 presents an analysis of the tunes used by different *puthi*-readers to read them. Schema theory is applied as the tool for analysis of individual tunes and their comparisons. Finally, the conclusion will summarise how the ethnographic and historical aims of the thesis, and the methods used to achieve them, have been pursued throughout. The implications of these aims and methods will be considered, as will suggestions for potential avenues of future research.

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I thank all of the *puthi*-readers, Muslim and Hindu, who allowed me to record their reading (most of whom were also prepared to be interviewed): Abdus Shukur, Abdul Kadir, Abdul Haq (and Modoris Ali who arranged the occasions and conducted the interviews), Aatur Rahman, Abdul Lotif, Boshir Ahmed, Johir Uddin, Siraj Uddin, Badsha Miah, Abdul Korim, Montazil Ali, Mojoy Ali, Nurun Nessa Begum, Dilara Begum, Neharun Nessa Khatun, Borun Bowri, Kripesh Banarji, Monoram Baraik, Joshodhon Baraik, Anima Das, Dipok Ranjan Das, Bokul Das, Jagadish Chandra Kshatriya, Bokul Malakar, Manoj Ranjan Chakrabarty, Jadunandan Roy Chowdhury, and Shankarananda Bhattacharya. Mustafa Kamal, formerly of the Islamic Foundation in Sylhet, kindly agreed to be interviewed on the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*-literature and its origins. I thank Mir Shah Alom of Bangladesh Betar (Radio Bangladesh), Sylhet, for arranging and conducting that interview.

I am especially grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for their generous financial support of my research.<sup>4</sup> I am also grateful to SOAS for providing me with a bursary to study Sylheti at the Syloti Language School (which is part of the Accelerated Language Institute of the Destiny Language Center) in Sylhet, between October 2002 and August 2003, before beginning my first year at SOAS. All the staff at the Syloti Language School were excellent, making my language-learning experience both rich and exciting. I also thank Destiny Associates for advertising for a research assistant on my behalf in the local newspapers, for arranging interviews with prospective candidates, and for transcribing and translating some of my performances and all of my interviews from my audio-recordings. I appreciate the support of the British Library, and Dr. Janet Topp-Fargion especially, for providing me with all my audio and audio-visual consumables, and for archiving my field-recordings in the

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<sup>4</sup> The AHRC funds postgraduate training and research in the arts and humanities, from archaeology and English literature to design and dance. The quality and range of research supported not only provides social and cultural benefits but also contributes to the economic success of the United Kingdom. For further information on the AHRC, please see [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

National Sound Archive. I am particularly indebted to James and Sue Lloyd-Williams of Sylheti Translation and Research (STAR) for freely sharing with me their expertise in, and their research of, the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* tradition. I thank them for giving me access to their corpus of photocopied and typed *puthis*, and for their permission to use and reproduce their transliteration scheme.

More personally, I thank my parents, Mike and Jane Kane, who have always encouraged me in my academic studies, and have made many sacrifices in order that I would be able to do so. Most of all, though, I thank my wife, Angela, who has walked with me through every stage of this doctoral journey. She has been a most faithful and loyal companion. Her belief in me, her constant encouragement and her unconditional support, have kept me going until the end. Angela also assisted me in my fieldwork by taking photographs during performances and by video-recording them, in addition to spending innumerable hours photographing *puthi* pages.

## Making Connections: *Puthi-Pora*, Islamisation, and the Muslim Bengali Literature

*Through every rift of discovery some seeming anomaly  
drops out of the darkness, and falls, as a golden link,  
into the great chain of order.*

Edwin Hubbell Chapin, 1814-1880.

Making connections is one of the most exciting aspects of academic enquiry; learning how new research fits in with what has gone before. However, this is not a linear process, at least not in my experience. The literature I read before my fieldwork naturally shaped the course of my field investigations; yet, the same literature, read during and after my fieldwork, particularly in the light of subsequent analysis, sometimes led to different conclusions regarding their relevance to the thesis hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> Presented here are the most important themes and issues drawn from a selection of this literature. The chapter title states what these themes are and the order in which their issues will be raised. As they relate to the thesis's focal subject, existing descriptions of *puthi-pora* will be evaluated first. This is significant in terms of the ethnography. The paucity of such references, combined with their lack of depth, ambiguities, and (in some places) inaccuracies, demonstrates that a thorough and holistic study of *puthi-pora* is needed. However, ethnography is just one part. A chronological survey of the historical processes involved in the Islamisation of Bengal is presented in the second place, followed by a consideration of the role played by the Muslim Bengali literature. The use of the latter in Islamisation is a connection well made by others. What is not so clear is *how* this literature was communicated. That it was through public and musical performance is implied but not explored. This is a connection this chapter seeks to make explicit.

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<sup>1</sup> What is presented in this chapter, therefore, is substantially different to what was presented in my Ph.D. upgrade paper, submitted in May 2004, at the end of my first year.

## ***Puthi-Pora*: Existing Definitions and Descriptions**

Existing definitions and descriptions of *puthi-pora* are extremely limited. The most recent are entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, both written by Bangladeshi musicologist Karunamaya Goswami, who uses *puthipāṭh* (or *puthi-pāṭh*)<sup>2</sup> in place of *puthi-pora*. *Puthi-pora*'s inclusion in these well-known musical reference works, alongside other genres of Bengali music, is an implicit but significant acknowledgment of the musical status of the tradition.<sup>3</sup> Goswami writes in *Garland* (2000:862):

*Puthipāṭh*, a type of folk-ballad rendition traditionally known as “reading,” is in fact a form of singing. Performers produce a kind of repetitive chanting of a single melody that consists of only three or four notes and simple rhythms. It is a very popular musical exercise in rural Bengal.

And in *New Grove* (2001:258-9):

Ballad recitation traditionally known as *puthi-pāṭh* (‘reading’) is a form of singing. The *bayāti*, which here means ‘reader’, sings the narrative by chanting a melody made of three or four notes.

Despite their concision, these two descriptions raise a number of issues relating to the definition and classification of the tradition. These include literary genre, performance practice, melody, function, and performance location.

Describing *puthi-pora* as ‘ballad recitation’ or a ‘type of folk-ballad rendition’ assumes the literary genre to be a specific kind—narrative.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in his *New Grove* entry, Goswami states this clearly; that the reader ‘sings the narrative’. Yet, the *puthi*-literature does not consist entirely of narrative material, even though this constitutes a significant part. Many other genres and compositional forms are found in the Sylheti-Nagri corpus alone (Bhuiya 2000:57-90; Lloyd-Williams 2001:1-21), with more than one genre often used within the same *puthi*. Goswami’s descriptions do not represent this variety, but this may be intentional. For, while the term *puthi*—defined as ‘a book or manuscript’—can surely contain a diversity of genres and forms, when it is used in conjunction with *pora*, or *pāṭh*—‘reading’—*puthi-pora* may be limited, by definition,

<sup>2</sup> ‘Pāṭh’ and ‘pora’ are related words. *Pāṭh[a]* preserves the original Sanskrit form which transformed into the Bengali *pora*. The distinction could be described as ‘high’ and ‘low’ Bengali.

<sup>3</sup> This appears to be a recent recognition. In the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, for example, *puthi-pora* had no entry. Indeed, none of the books on the folk music of Bengal that I have encountered (in English) consider *puthi-pora* in their lists.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ‘ballad’ is defined as ‘a poem or song narrating a popular story’ (Allen ed. 1990:82)

to the performance of certain *puthi*-types. A narrative or a didactic *puthi* can logically be ‘read’, but what about those *puthis* containing lyrical songs? This question will be discussed in chapter 4.

In attempting to define what *puthi-pora* is, Goswami is somewhat ambiguous. Although he states that *puthi-pora* is literally and ‘traditionally known as “reading,”’ he is quick to qualify what this means—for ‘reading’ does not capture, or adequately describe (to a Western mind, at least), the musical nature of its performance. What are the performers doing, *definably*, as they ‘recite’ or ‘render’ a text? This is not an easy question to answer as Goswami’s qualifiers suggest. He redefines ‘reading’ as ‘a *form* of singing’ or ‘a *kind* of repetitive chanting’, in which the reader ‘*sings* the narrative by *chanting*’ (emphasis mine). ‘Singing’ and ‘chanting’ have their own connotations, of course, and Goswami’s use of the latter most likely stems from his description of *puthi-pora* as repetitive, melodically limited, and rhythmically simple. But how does ‘a *form* of singing’ differ from ‘singing’? And how does ‘a *kind* of...chanting’ differ from ‘chanting’? Goswami’s assertion that performers ‘produce...a single melody’ is also unclear. Does he mean that *puthi*-readers use a ‘single melody’ in their reading of a ‘single narrative’ (one tune per *puthi*), or a ‘single melody’ for all of them? And how is this ‘single melody...of *only* three or four notes and simple rhythms’ produced (emphasis mine)? Is it created in the process of performance, or is it predetermined, prescribed (in the *puthi* or elsewhere), and learned? These are some of the questions which will be discussed in chapter 5.

The other issues which arise from *Garland* relate to function and performance location. Goswami states that *puthi-pora* is ‘a very popular musical exercise in rural Bengal’. This is misleading. A ‘musical exercise’ (to a Western mind, again) conjures up images of scales and arpeggios, a book like Hanon’s *The Virtuoso Pianist* perhaps. In other words, it has wholly musical associations and implies instrumental practice. While I do not believe that this is what Goswami intends us to understand, he creates the potential for this kind of a misunderstanding by using these words. Moreover, in terms of performance location, Goswami’s comment that *puthi-pora* takes place in rural Bengal, although true, is too narrow. Function and performance location will be discussed in chapter 3, along with other aspects of performance context.

Other than these brief definitions, the only other reference to *puthi-pora* that I have discovered is in Mary Frances Dunham’s book, *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of*



*Bangladesh*. Dunham's description of the tradition is fuller than Goswami's, but it does not stand alone; it is found in a chapter which discusses the origins of the *jarigan* tradition.<sup>5</sup> Dunham concludes that *jarigan* songs 'are the offspring of a rich ancestry in both literary and bardic genres and in both local and foreign influences' (1997:48). While she admits that more research is necessary in order to trace this ancestry more concretely, Dunham considers *puthi-pora* along with a number of other traditions of Bengali 'ballad' literature as a possible 'bardic parent'.<sup>6</sup> She writes (1997:46):

Another model for *jarigan* compositions may have been the recitations known as *punthi path* or called *punthi pora*, both terms meaning readings or recitations in verse or prose. *Path* and *pora* generally refer to reading passages from *punthis* (literally, "manuscripts"); that is, readings or recitations from actual written material, generally from the *puranas* (literally, ancient things). These include an indefinite stock of tales from the great Hindu epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, and from lesser ones, such as the *Gīta Govinda*...

Here, Dunham makes explicit what Goswami only implies, that *puthi-pora* is reading or recitation from 'actual written material'. She also goes on to specify where this material is 'generally' to be found—in the *puranas* (*purāṇs*), which she defines as 'ancient thing(s), especially in reference to revered ancient literature of a scriptural nature' (1997:330). Her definition of *purāṇ* is broad, including not only 'an indefinite stock of tales from the great Hindu epics...and from [the] lesser ones' as she notes above, but also 'stories and teachings of the Buddha and other great religious leaders and saints' (1997:330). That Dunham means to include Islamic 'stories and teachings' in this definition is made clear when she asserts that different religious groups have their own collections of *puthi*-literature (1997:46):

Depending on the affiliation of the reader, the texts vary according to the religions and their sects. Each sect or cult has its own stock of *punthi* literature, whether from the ancient epics of the Hindus, from the *Jataka* tales of the Buddhists (episodes on the life of the Buddha) or from the Muharram stories of the Muslims.

This description of *puthi*-content is rather all-embracing, which, at face value, is reasonable, considering that the literal definition of *puthi*—'book or manuscript'—does not indicate content. But does each 'sect or cult' really use this term to describe

<sup>5</sup> Dunham (1997:326) describes *jarigan* as: 'literally, lamentation-song. The expression refers to Bengali Muslim narrative folk songs of epic dimension, generally associated with the Karbala cycle of stories, but including as well many other types of stories: episodes from Biblical-Koranic sources, post-Karbala events, romances, and modern commentaries.'

<sup>6</sup> These other traditions include '*rasos*', *pācali*, *moṅgol-kabýo*, *bijoy-kabýo*, *gajirgan*, *kīrtan* and *kobigan* (Dunham 1997:45-50). Reference will be made to some of these later in the chapter as they have relevance to *puthi-pora*.

their ‘own stock...of literature’? Or, does it refer, more specifically, to the literature of one religious group? Although Dunham uses *puran* inclusively, the word actually refers to a body of literature with distinctly Hindu associations.<sup>7</sup> If *purans* are the source from which *puthi*-content is ‘generally’ taken, this would mean that the *puthi*-literature is primarily, even if not exclusively, Hindu.

However, in *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Roy (1983:xiv, fn. 12) appeals to the ‘original meaning’ of the term *puthi*—‘a handwritten manuscript in Bengali’—as justification for including manuscripts of Bengali Muslim authorship as part of the *puthi*-literature. ‘With the advent of printing,’ though, Roy notes that ‘the meaning of the word was extended to include all Bengali printed works in verse.’ That verse became a defining feature of the genre is corroborated by Ahmed (1988: xx),<sup>8</sup> but he goes further. Ahmed states that ‘the term [*puthi*] generally came to be associated with a particular genre composed in verse’ (emphasis mine). ‘From the middle of the sixteenth century,’ he continues

this new type of poetical composition developed using Bengali, mixed with Persian and Hindustani terms, and authored by men who lived close to the poorer sections of the society. The early compositions were both by Hindu and Muslim writers and they dealt with a variety of subjects, including religious questions. ...By the middle of the nineteenth century, [however,] the *puthi* became almost an exclusive concern of semi-literate Muslims...

The sixteenth and nineteenth centuries are two particularly significant periods in the history of Islamisation, as we shall see below. For now, it is important to note that although the meaning of the term *puthi* has expanded to include printed books as well as handwritten manuscripts (anything written in verse, essentially), its associations, in terms of religious content, have narrowed. Dunham was not wrong to suggest that the content of the *puthi*-literature is broad; nor was she wrong to highlight the particular import of the *purans*.<sup>9</sup> But it appears that the associations developed in the nineteenth century have remained, and that *puthis* are associated with Muslim Bengali literature.

<sup>7</sup> The *Samsad Student's Bengali-English Dictionary* defines *puran* as ‘myth’ or ‘mythology’ when used as a noun, or ‘ancient’ when used as an adjective (Ghosh ed. 2002:376). While the Hindu association is not explicit here, it can be assumed on the basis that the *Samsad* dictionary contains primarily Hindu (Standard Bengali) vocabulary. The *Bangla Academy Bengali-English Dictionary* on the other hand, which contains largely Muslim Bengali vocabulary, defines *puran* similarly as an adjective, ‘belonging to ancient/olden times; ancient’, but as a noun it specifies the Hindu connotation—the ‘name of a class of Hindu sacred works’ (Ali ed. 1999:438).

<sup>8</sup> This challenges Dunham’s definition of *puthi-pora* above, as ‘readings or recitations in verse or prose’ (emphasis mine).

<sup>9</sup> As we shall see in the section looking at the Muslim Bengali literature below, the narrative poems included in this corpus were a major influence in the construction of the Islamic syncretistic tradition.

Does this mean, therefore, that *puthi-pora* is understood today as an Islamic tradition only? Or, can *puthi-pora* refer to the reading of any book or manuscript, regardless of its religious (or secular) content? This question is touched upon in the conclusion.

Dunham (1997:46) continues her description of *puthi-pora* with a reference to the *puthi*-reader and the context of performance:

In modern times a “*punthi pathak*” (*punthi* reader) may be a professional reader or a family member who entertains family and neighbors in the evening with a favorite story...

If the “reader” is literate, he or she may actually read from a book in which the stories are collected, but often the “reader” knows the stories by heart and declaims or chants them in prose or in poetry. In Bengal, the verse form of storytelling is generally preferred to prose form. Presumably verse is rendered in song. Poetic recitations and song are almost synonymous in traditional Bengali culture. Even a recitation of prose includes musical aspects, because reading out loud by Bengalis is often half-chanted or declaimed.

There are a few issues here that need closer examination. The first relates to the *puthi*-reader. While Dunham may have met a professional *puthi*-reader in the course of her research,<sup>10</sup> the idea that anybody could earn a living from *puthi-pora* was ridiculous to the Muslim readers I interviewed in Sylhet. In the light of her comments above, however, it is possible that she has a Hindu (rather than a Muslim) reader in mind here, as roles of reader and priest overlap in Hindu tradition. This would be consistent with her emphasis on the *purans* as the main (or ‘general’) inspirational source of the *puthi*-literature. Dunham’s other category, ‘a family member’, insofar as it suggests a non-professional reader, is a more accurate description of the Muslim readers. But the idea that they, Hindu or Muslim, merely entertain family and friends to pass long dark evenings is an over-simplification of both the performance context and the function of the tradition. These issues, also mentioned above, are considered in chapter 3.

The second issue relates to the ‘literacy’ of the *puthi*-reader. Dunham gives the impression that, while some readers *may* read from a *puthi*-text *if* they are literate, it is more common for the ‘stories’ to be ‘declaimed’ or ‘chanted’ by heart. She adds in a footnote (1997:199, fn.24), ‘I have been told by a Bangladeshi friend that even if the “reader” is unable to read, he holds the book open in front of him from which he “reads”—that is, recites’. It is ‘the venerability of the text’, Dunham (1997:46) states, rather than whether the text is read from a book or manuscript, or recited by heart, that ‘classifies the recitation as “*punthi path*”’. All the *puthi*-readers I met in Sylhet were

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<sup>10</sup> A ‘professional’, by definition, is somebody who is able to earn their living by what they do.

clearly able to read their *puthi*-texts, however, and did so without exception (even the women). The fact that some readers occasionally stumbled over words in their texts, confirmed that they were *actually* reading and not merely *mimicking* reading. While some *puthi*-readers said that they can recite from memory if asked to, I only observed it once (when I asked). It seems that a *puthi*-reader's 'memorisation' of the text is best demonstrated by correcting another reader who may happen to misread a word in the performance itself. This was a common feature in the performances I observed, and it will be discussed in chapter 3 (in the context of the tradition's function).

The third issue relates to performance practice. Like Goswami, Dunham is not particularly clear here. She states that the reader 'declaims or chants them [the stories] in prose or in poetry' noting that 'In Bengal, the verse form of storytelling is generally preferred to prose form' (1997:46). This implies that a reader simply chooses between 'telling the story' in verse or in prose in the process of performance. Again, this may describe the performance of certain Hindu texts,<sup>11</sup> but it was not a feature of the *puthi-poṛa* of the Muslim readers whom I observed. Other than occasional impromptu explanations (which are significant in relation to function), the Muslim readers did not deviate from the *puthi*-text at all. If they did, the divergence appeared to be a simple misreading of the text rather than intentional variation, and if there were other readers present who also knew the text, they corrected them as noted above.

Having stated that verse is the preferred storytelling medium in Bengal, it is interesting that Dunham goes on to say that verse is 'Presumably...rendered in song', adding that 'Poetic recitations and song are almost synonymous in traditional Bengali culture.' This is interesting, not least because, in a later section, Dunham (1997:49) highlights the fact that *jarigan* is song and *not* reading (like *puthi-poṛa*):

In the case of *jarigan* poetry, the text is more than chanted or declaimed; it is fully rendered in song. The themes of *jarigan* poetry may be considered a sub-class of *punthi path*, but the poetic form of *jarigan* songs is so influenced by melodic interpretation that *jarigan* poetry is, indeed, *gan* (song), as its name indicates, and not *path* (a reading). By contrast to *punthi* literature, the structure of *jarigan* poetry

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<sup>11</sup> I witnessed the interchangeable use of verse and prose during a performance of the Hindu *puthi*, *Podmo-Puraṇ*, which I attended in Rajnagar, Moulvibazar, on June 21, 2005. Here, Bokul Malakar, a professional performer who had memorised the whole *Monosa-Mongol* narrative (*Monosa* is the snake-goddess whose exploits are related in this *puthi*), performed a condensed version of the story which would otherwise be performed each night of the Bengal month of *Śrabon* (mid-July to mid-August). His use of prose enabled him both rapidly to advance the narrative and to interact personally with the audience.

shows how Bengali poetic texts seem to be composed with a tune in mind rather than in isolation.

Dunham focuses here on the relationship between poetic form and its melodic interpretation. It is the influence of the latter, she argues, that makes *jarigan* song and not reading. In order to make the point more strongly, she contrasts the compositional process of *puthi*-texts with *jarigan* texts. She assumes that the former were composed in melodic isolation; the latter, composed 'with a tune in mind'. It would be difficult to test Dunham's assumption regarding the *puthi*-texts, but her comments relating to *jarigan* make sense if we understand her contention regarding the fundamental nature of *jarigan* texts (1997:49):

*Jarigan* poetry differs essentially from *punthi path* literature in that it was never intended to be written down. The texts of *jarigan* songs are transmitted orally. Exceptionally, some *jarigan* singers consult transcriptions, as did one group of *jarigan* singers whom I recorded. Otherwise, the *boyati* composes a *jarigan ex tempore* as well as through alterations of inherited songs.

There are some simple but important distinctions drawn here between *jarigan* texts and *puthi*-texts—*jarigan* texts are oral, *puthi*-texts are written; *jarigan* texts are composed in the process of performance, *puthi*-texts are read in performance; *jarigan* texts are transmitted orally, *puthi*-texts are passed on as physical objects.<sup>12</sup> It is a lack of textual fixity and the resultant flexibility in spontaneous poetic composition that leads Dunham (1997:49) to state the case for *jarigan*, in deliberate contrast to *puthi-pora*, as a pre-eminently musical tradition:

Because of its fundamentally musical nature, *jarigan* verse is further distinguished from *punthi path* literature by the freedom that the *jarigan* singer has to improvise and to alter the standard verse structure of *jarigan* poetry to fit a particular tune. In reverse, *jarigan* compositions that are less musically oriented, and more chant-like, more like *path* recitals, articulate a traditional verse form. How the *jarigan* singer integrates textual verse and melody is an art that distinguishes *jarigan* singing from *punthi path*.

While there is no denying that *jarigan* singers have greater opportunity for individual creativity than *puthi*-readers (in their 'freedom' to re-create text and tune in the process of performance),<sup>13</sup> it does not inevitably follow that *jarigan* is, therefore, a more 'musical' tradition than *puthi-pora*. Dunham implies this though by associating

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the tunes used in *puthi-pora* are not written down, however. Where these are transmitted, they are transmitted orally.

<sup>13</sup> Of the individual creativity of *jarigan boyatis*, see Kane (2001).

‘less musically orientated’ *jarīgan* compositions with ‘*path* recitals’ and contrasting them with those of a ‘fundamentally musical nature’ based, primarily it seems, on the performer’s interaction with the text. In the former, the performer simply ‘articulate[s] a traditional verse form’, in contrast to the ‘freedom’ the performer has in the latter, to ‘improvise and to alter the standard verse structure...to fit a particular tune’. While this may be a feature that distinguishes the two traditions, there is no reason why the articulation of the traditional verse form of a fixed text should be any less ‘musical’. This is surely down to the competence of the performer. Dunham (1997:49) refers to performer competency in the previous paragraph:

Casual performances of *jarīgan* songs, which may be declaimed rather than sung, may resemble *path* more than *gan*, depending on the excellence of the performer. However, most *jarīgan* performers are talented poet-musicians and, to some extent, actors. In this respect, their performances belong to the *pala-gan* or *gitika* (song-story) category more than to the *punthi path* one.

Here, Dunham associates ‘casual’ *jarīgan* performance with *puthi-poṛa*. The following clause—‘depending on the excellence of the performer’—implies that good singers will perform *jarīgan* in a way that resembles song more than reading (i.e. in a ‘fundamentally musical’ way) and that not-so-good singers will perform in a way that resembles reading more than song (i.e. in a ‘less musically orientated’ way). But if the ‘excellence of the performer’ can determine the level of ‘musicality’ (whatever that may mean) in a *jarīgan* performance, the same can surely be true of *puthi-poṛa*. Dunham has made some helpful distinctions between *jarīgan* and *puthi-poṛa*, but her attempt to define *jarīgan* ‘as *gan*, not *path*’ has also led her to make unwarranted claims regarding their relative musical status. Questions relating to the musical status of *puthi-poṛa* will be discussed in chapter 5.

Goswami’s and Dunham’s references are significant in acknowledging *puthi-poṛa* as a performance tradition, but each raises issues which require a much fuller treatment, particularly those relating to performance context, content, and the tradition’s musical status. Some aspects of these existing descriptions are generally ambiguous; others are too simplistic, or simply wrong. The disparity in areas which contrasted with my own observations may have had something to do with the differences between the readings of Hindu- and Muslim-authored *puthis*; for it seems that Goswami and Dunham both describe *puthi-poṛa* in a predominantly Hindu context. The point of departure in this

thesis, however, is the performance of the *puthis* of Muslim-authorship—specifically those written in the Sylheti-Nagri script—but understanding the link between the two traditions is critical. Where relevant, I refer to features of the performance of Hindu traditions of book and manuscript reading in the following chapters and compare them with the Muslim tradition, but, without knowledge of the historical processes involved in the Islamisation in Bengal, and the development of Muslim Bengali literature, these comparisons will make little sense. It is to these two themes that we now turn.

## Islamisation in Bengal: Two Historical Phases

Islamisation in Bengal is something of a mystery. Approximately 135 million Bengali Muslims living in Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal today testify to the historical processes of Islamisation in the deltaic region, but Islamists and historians have long been baffled by *how* and *why* Islam spread so effectively there. In *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Eaton (1993:xxii) asks *why*:

...why did such a large Muslim population emerge in Bengal—so distant from the Middle East, from which Islam historically expanded—and not in other regions of India? And within Bengal, why did Islamization occur at so much greater a rate in the east than in the west? Who converted and why? At what time? [And] What, if anything, did “conversion” mean to contemporary Bengalis?

Of the *how*, Abecassis (1990:9) writes:

The precise way in which [Islam] spread in Bengal, and the reasons for its rapid and widespread acceptance, are shrouded in some mystery.

Bengal was no different from the rest of the Indian subcontinent in that it was ruled over by Muslim sovereigns from the thirteenth century until the inception of British rule. What did make Bengal different, though, was that it was the only province in which the majority of the local population embraced the religion of its rulers. This in itself was a profound paradox as, in Eaton’s words (1993:xxv), ‘a substantial majority of Bengal’s Muslim population emerged under a regime [the Mughals] that did not, as a matter of policy, promote the conversion of Bengalis to Islam.’

Needless to say, theories and speculations have proliferated to explain this so-called ‘phenomenon’ (Roy 1996:100), and it is in this arena that issues of Islamisation and, particularly, mass conversion to Islam are raised and contested. Eaton (1993:113-34) outlines four conventional theories of Islamisation which have been applied to the

Bengali context, each of which he dismisses for a lack of original evidence.<sup>14</sup> He also criticises their proponents for making no serious attempt to establish when and where Islam emerged as a mass religion. What Eaton calls for is what he attempts to write—a historical reconstruction based on geographical and chronological fact. His thesis is compelling, particularly read together with Roy's *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, a key work on the role of the Muslim Bengali literature in the Islamisation of Bengal. I will refer to the latter in the following section, but first I will present the main threads of Eaton's argument as they relate to the first phase of Islamisation from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. This will be followed by a consideration of Islamisation's second phase: the Islamic reform and revivalist movements which took place from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

### *Phase One: The Development of the Syncretistic Tradition*

Eaton's theory of Islamisation links the establishment and evolution of Islamic society and culture in Bengal with the advance of agrarian civilisation over the forests of the eastern delta. He explains these two interrelated themes as products of various forces, each linked to the general eastward movement of three different but connected frontiers—political, agrarian, and Islamic.<sup>15</sup> The first of these frontiers was part of the thirteenth-century Turkic drive eastwards, both to and within Bengal; this frontier was subject to rapid movement as the Muslim regime established and articulated its authority by force of arms over the subjugated peoples. Unlike the political frontier, the agrarian frontier was more stable, slower-moving, and subject to natural as well as human forces; this involved the gradual shifting of the delta's river systems, and, with it, colonisation. The Islamic frontier, very much a corollary of the latter, involved the gradual assimilation of local communities into a Muslim-oriented devotional life. Eaton argues that in the interaction between these different frontiers, collectively superimposed upon a much older frontier—that of Sanskrit civilisation and its own long-term eastward march in the Bengal delta—lay the foundation for the rooting of Islam in Bengal.

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<sup>14</sup> Eaton describes these as the 'Immigration theory', the 'Religion of the Sword thesis', the 'Religion of Patronage theory', and the 'Religion of Social Liberation thesis'.

<sup>15</sup> Bengal itself is defined by geographical frontiers—mountains to the north and the east and the sea to the south—making it a 'terminus of a continentwide process of Turko-Mongol conquest and migration. It was, in short, a frontier zone' (Eaton 1993:xxiii).



While Islam had made brief forays into Bengal through Arab traders as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, and later with Sufis from North India from the eleventh, the influx was not significant until the fall of the Sena dynasty in 1204 at the hands of Muhammad Bakhtiyar. This marked the annexing of Bengal to the Turko-Afghan rulers of the Delhi sultanate. But their hold on the province did not last long. In 1342, Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah, a powerful noble, rose up and broke Delhi's grip on Bengal and founded the first independent Muslim dynasty, the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, which ruled over the delta for nearly a century. Bengal remained free from North India for the next two and a half centuries, until it was finally reintegrated in the Mughal era. What was particularly significant about this period of independence and isolation from North India (in terms of the ultimate Islamisation of the delta), was that it forced the independent rulers to find political connectivity in the local society and culture of Bengal. Here, most of Bengal west of the Karatoya River had become settled by an agrarian population which was well integrated into an Indo-Aryan and Hindu civilisation.

The delta at this time was also becoming an important part of the commercial network of the Indian Ocean. This was not just in trade, but in the circulation of texts and values sustained by travelling Sufis, pilgrims, merchants, adventurers, scholars, and soldiers. An Islamic ethos was beginning to permeate and to accommodate itself within deltaic culture through politics and commerce. These were useful networks to be exploited by the Muslim rulers, but they were not sufficient in and of themselves to lead to the emergence of Islam as a mass religion.

Allied to these developments was the long-term eastward movement of the delta's river systems, carrying with them silt deposits and fresh water necessary for wet rice agriculture. Over time, this resulted in the gradual shift of the epicentre of agrarian civilisation from the western delta to the east. A 'decisive moment' came in the late sixteenth century, writes Eaton (1993:307), when the river Ganges linked up with the Padma with the result that the 'Ganges's main discharge flowed directly into the heart of the eastern delta. By momentous coincidence,' he continues,

this happened about the time that Akbar launched efforts to incorporate the entire delta into the Mughal Empire, thereby ending Bengal's two and a half centuries of political isolation from North India. As a result, the Ganges carried the Mughal conquerors straight into what had been for the Bengal sultans a distant, forested hinterland. There the new rulers planted their provincial headquarters.

Dhaka became the new provincial capital, strategically selected as a base from which to pursue and subdue any remaining independently-minded chieftains who had sought refuge in the east. Not only was this timely for the accomplishment of political ends, the ecological changes, noted above, also meant that the east had become the richest part of the delta for agrarian expansion. The challenge here, however, was that by the early seventeenth century the east was still largely undeveloped. As a result, there was no functioning agrarian order, and very few gentry (*zomindars*) for Mughal officers to co-opt to help them (a policy they had adopted in the west); they had to create a local gentry, and establish new agrarian communities.

Once the rebel chieftains had been subdued, the focus of the government's political goal—to deepen its authority at a local level—became fused with their economic goal—to expand the arable land mass. The result of this fusion was to support an emerging gentry linked to dependent clients who were rooted on the land. This was achieved, primarily, through the distribution of land grants given for the agricultural development of previously impenetrable jungle forests. While grants were given to Hindus as well as Muslims, the majority were received by the latter—Mullahs, preachers, pilgrims recently returned from Mecca, and holy men, or *pīrs*.<sup>16</sup> It was these kinds of men that constituted the State's new religious gentry, pioneers who had overseen, or committed to oversee, the clearing of the forests and the construction of mosques or shrines. Institutions such as these, writes Eaton (1993:308),

became the nuclei of new communities, attracting local or distant labor for clearing the forest and working the rice fields included in the grants. [They]...also possessed considerable cultural influence, becoming the nuclei for the diffusion of Islamic ideals along the eastern frontier. In this way Islam gradually became associated with economic development and agricultural productivity.

The new peasant communities that had formerly been engaged in fishing and shifting cultivation were now dependent clients of the Muslim religious gentry. This was not just an economic dependence, however; the peasant communities came to venerate the

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<sup>16</sup> Roy (1983:50-1) describes the men who constituted this new religious gentry as 'disparate Muslims', noting that 'They were covered by a general name of *pir*, which, in Bengal, embodied a far wider range of phenomena than is apparently suggested by the usual meaning and application of the term. *Pir*, a Persian word, and etymologically older, denotes "a spiritual director or guide" among Muslim mystics called *sufis*. But the total range of phenomena covered by, and associated with, the nomenclature *pir* assumed in Bengal strikingly variegated forms. At the level of the Bengali Muslim folk the frame of reference to *pir* extended far beyond the range of the mystic guides, saints, and holy men, and this amorphous label came to cover a vast motley of popular objects of worship and supplication, not all of them being saints, or *sufis*, or religious personages, or Muslims, or even human beings.'

Muslim pioneers as religious leaders—a spiritual dependence which Eaton (1993:236) explains as a ‘predisposition to follow holy men.’

The mosques and shrines scattered throughout the new frontier had established a base for the religious gentry to spread Islamic ideals among the peasant workers. In this they were greatly aided by the diffusion of papermaking technology, which, like the shifting of the river systems, also ‘happened’ to coincide with the expansion of the Mughal Empire. This development led to a proliferation of books and a resulting ‘culture of literacy’ which spread out from the state’s urban centres to the countryside. Contemporary sources reveal that, as part of their endowments, the rural mosques and shrines included provision for Qur’anic readers (*karī*). This was significant for those who presided over these institutions, as their ultimate authority, and the authority of their religion, lay in the written word. But they faced a linguistic challenge here; the Qur’an had been revealed in Arabic, a language unknown to the Bengali masses, but no-one dared attempt a direct translation for fear of altering the sacred text.<sup>17</sup> Even so, Eaton (1993:309) states that ‘the culture of literacy endowed the cult of Allah with a kind of authority—that of the unchangeable written word—that preliterate forest cults had lacked’,<sup>18</sup> and thus, in the east, ‘Islam came to be understood as the religion, not only of the ax and the plow, but also of the book.’

This ‘culture of literacy’ was not limited to the Qur’an, though, or to other works in Arabic or Persian. While the ‘forest pioneers on the eastern frontier were planting the institutional foundations of Islamic rituals,’ writes Eaton (1993:276, 278), ‘Bengali poets deepened the semantic meanings of these rituals by identifying the lore and even the superhuman agencies of an originally foreign creed with those of the local culture’. They consciously presented ‘Islamic imagery and ideas in terms readily familiar to a rural population of nominal Muslims saturated with folk Bengali and Hindu religious ideas.’ In this way, and over a long period of time, Islamic superhuman agencies ‘seeped’ into local cosmologies. Because this ‘seepage’ was gradual and acculturative, Islam was never perceived as an alien religion or as a closed and exclusive system to be accepted or rejected as a whole.

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<sup>17</sup> The Qur’an was not fully translated into Bengali until the late nineteenth century (1881-1886), and, even then, it was by a Hindu, Girish Chandra Sen. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Qur’an was popularly attributed with magical power when it first entered Bengal.

<sup>18</sup> While Hindu tradition also finds its basis in written (Vedic) scripture, Brahmanical authority and influence had not extended much beyond the Karatoya River as noted above. This lack of Brahmanical presence and its authority structure made it easier for Islam to take root in the east and to have a much greater impact here than in the west.

Therefore, 'In the context of pre-modern Bengal,' Eaton (1993:310) states, 'it would seem inappropriate to speak of the "conversion" of "Hindus" to Islam.' Rather, 'What one finds,' he concludes, 'is an expanding agrarian civilization, whose cultural counterpart was the growth of the cult of Allah.' It is clear from this reconstruction of events that the rooting of Islam in Bengal was the culmination of numerous complex historical processes, not the product of a mass conversion movement. The movement and interaction of the frontiers described above laid the foundation for the inclusion of Islamic superhuman agencies within local cosmologies and their later identification one with the other. But this is where Eaton's historical account ends. Islamisation had begun, and a syncretistic tradition of Islam had developed. But Islamisation was now to begin a more aggressive phase in the reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was during this time that a final displacement of local beliefs in favour of the monotheistic ideals of Islam took place (or was at least attempted).

### *Phase Two: The Reformist Reaction*

This phase of Islamisation was part of a global Islamic revitalisation. The earliest and most prominent reform movements in Bengal were the *Tariqat-i-Muhammadiyah* and *Fara'idi*. *Tariqat-i-Muhammadiyah* was founded in Delhi in 1818, by Sayyid Ahmad Shahid (1786-1831) and Shah Ismail Shahid (1781-1831). In 1837 the group split into the Patna School, *Ta'aiyuni* and *Ahl-i-hadith*. Also founded in 1818, by Haji Shari'at Allah (1781-1840) in East Bengal, was *Fara'idi*, a movement inspired by the Wahabi movement of Arabia. Despite the differences in their doctrinal positions (which were often great), all of the reform movements were united in their efforts to purge Bengali Muslim society of its 'age-long un-Islamic beliefs and practices' (Ahmed 1988:41), and to reform society in accordance with the original teachings of Islam. In doing so, they were reacting against the centuries of acculturation described above.

The institution most under attack was *pīrism*. This was viewed as particularly un-Islamic by the reformers, and *pīrs* (and their descendents) were the object of some of the reformers' severest criticism for their syncretistic practices. While doctrine was at the heart of all their attacks, the reformers were also reacting against what they saw as the economic exploitation of the masses by the *pīrs* and village *mullahs* who, along with their associates, held control over social and religious life. The *mullahs* and *pīrs*, 'traditionalists', were not against all the reformers stood for, but they were opposed to

the propaganda that attempted to undermine the bases from which they derived their livelihoods (*Fara'idi*, in particular, sought their total abolition). Therefore, in order to maintain their positions, the traditionalist *mullahs* and *pīrs* warned the people against such propaganda and urged them to persist in their syncretistic devotion. Such was the hold of *pīrism* on the lives of the Bengali Muslims that even the members of *Tariqat-i-Muhammadiyah* began appealing to this mass-sentiment by referring to their leaders as *pīrs*. Unlike the village *mullahs*, however, the reformist preachers were not closely involved in the daily lives and aspirations of the rural poor, so it was not easy for them to break the influence of the former over the people.

What developed was a war of words between reformers and traditionalists for the minds and hearts of the masses, in which the propaganda of the former was met by the counter-propaganda of the latter. This gave rise to serious conflicts within Muslim society that affected all sectors of the rural population, either directly or indirectly. In the long run, notes Ahmed (1988:74), these conflicts had positive results. For the first time, religious issues which affected the ordinary Muslim became the subject of open debate (*bahas*). Debates were often intense and heated and most ended inconclusively. Doctrinal differences between contending parties were rarely settled and generally led to greater animosity between opponents than before. Indeed, police were often present at the debates, as tensions could boil over to mob violence. For some, the 'victory' or 'defeat' of their party became more important than the specific issue of doctrine under discussion. Others, therefore, saw *bahas* as unhelpful and divisive, only causing harm to Bengali Muslim society. What they did achieve, however, was to create an interest in, and raise an awareness of, doctrinal issues which led to a renewed interest in Islam and an Islamic way of life.

This increased awareness notwithstanding, Ahmed (1988:61) writes that 'The emotional attachment of the average Bengali Muslim to his *pir*, living or dead, and his faith in his immense miraculous powers was so deep and pervasive that no amount of denunciation could undermine his devotion.' In spite of their 'ceaseless and relentless anti-syncretistic propaganda' (Roy 1983:xvii), then, the reformers were not ultimately successful in undermining the syncretistic tradition. Instead, the Islamic identity of the Bengali converts was brought into sharp relief. 'As a syncretistic Muslim's total life-style lay naked before the puritan's scanning eyes', Roy (1983:xviii) notes, 'it covered him with a sense of "shame" and "guilt."' Naturally, this created something of a crisis

of identity for the ordinary Muslim in Bengal who, as a result of this process, was left not fully Bengali, but not wholly Muslim either.

Nevertheless, the reformers were instrumental in achieving the sharpening of a pan-Islamic consciousness. The conflict and tension, paradoxically, resulted in deeper social integration within the Muslim community, and a greater differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Roy (2001:211) writes:

These developments had the effect of leavening [sic] the ground for the subsequent penetration of urban religious and political influences into the rural areas, successfully trying to impose a broad frame of religious unity on the community for the ultimate objective of its political mobilisation.

Such changes were exploited by an emerging Muslim Bengali middle class in the early twentieth century, who aimed to establish a political community that was both Islamic and Bengali. A shift was now beginning to take place—from the extreme emphasis on a foreign Islamic identity, to one which once again adopted the Bengali language as the medium of expression and which had an attachment to local cultural mores and values. These men sought to sharpen the sense of an Islamic community as a whole, but not at the expense of cultural distinctiveness. They rejected the concept of a supra-territorial nationalism of Islam which meant renouncing an attachment to their native soil. Roy (2001:220) quotes one author who said ‘Nothing could be more “strange and regrettable” than that “we are still unable to accept as homeland the country we have been living for the last seven centuries.”’

Thus, in the initial decades of the twentieth century, the issues were becoming more secular than religious. Bengali language and culture were not seen as incompatible with Islam by those who sought regional and religious autonomy from Britain and India. The partition of East Bengal to Pakistan in 1947 went some way to establish a nation on the basis of religion, but it was detrimental to regional Bengali identity. The level of inequality and injustice that the Bengalis suffered at the hands of West Pakistan resulted in a greater drive towards complete autonomy. It was the push for Urdu to become the national language of both wings of Pakistan that was the final straw. Protests against this language act found a tragic expression in the massacre of Bengali students at Dhaka University on February 21, 1952 by West Pakistani troops. The only way forward for the Bengali Muslim nationalists now was to assert complete independence from Pakistan. This they did—and the Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh was born on December 16, 1971.

To summarise, there were at least two prominent phases in the Islamisation of Bengal. The first was gradual and contextualised; building on the foundation of the west-east shift of political and agrarian frontiers, a ‘seepage’ of Islamic ideals into local culture, their inclusion and identification one with the other over a period of three centuries, resulted in the development of an acculturated and syncretistic Islamic tradition. The second phase was abrupt and counter-cultural; inspired by great pan-Islamic zeal, the reformers sought to rid Islam in Bengal of its pre-Islamic elements and attacked the syncretistic beliefs which were, by this time, deeply held by the Muslim masses. But there are still unanswered questions. We have learned something of *what* happened and *why*, but little of the *how*—the ‘precise way’ in which Islamisation occurred, or of the ‘mechanics’ of the processes involved (Abecassis 1990:9, 11). How did Islamic ideals ‘seep’ into local culture and become acculturated? In what way, and by what means, did the reformers mount their attack on the syncretistic tradition? To answer these questions we need to consider the role of the Muslim Bengali literature.

## The Muslim Bengali Literature

The earliest extant Muslim Bengali literature dates from the sixteenth century, the late Middle Bengali Period in the chronology of the development of the Bengali language, c.1500-1800 A.D.<sup>19</sup> These dates correspond with the first phase of Islamisation and the Islamic syncretistic tradition. During this period, and since at least the tenth century, verse was the sole literary medium. Along with the birth of the reform movements, the coming of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of Modern or New Bengali and the emergence of prose. Prose was adopted by the educated Muslims, but its use was mostly confined to urban centres. *Puthis*, composed in verse, remained the main vehicle of communication to the peasant masses, even for the reformers. This section will consider the *puthi*-literature of both historical phases, beginning with the *puthis* of the syncretistic tradition.

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<sup>19</sup> Chatterji (2002:129-36) notes three different periods in the development of the Bengali language: (1) the formative Old Bengali Period, c.950-1200 A.D.; (2) the Middle Bengali Period, c.1200-1800 A.D., which he further subdivides into (a) transitional, c.1200-1300; (b) early, c.1300-1500; and (c) late, c.1500-1800; and (3) Modern or New Bengali, from 1800.

### *Puthis of the Syncretistic Tradition*

Eaton's historical reconstruction suggests that the 'forest pioneers' (or the religious gentry) and 'Bengali poets' of this early phase were two different groups of people, but he does not describe their relationship. We are not told whether the poets received patronage from the religious gentry or from the institutions they presided over, nor are we told how their literary output was used. Yet it is clear that their acculturation of the message of Islam was intentional and that it provided semantic depth to the rituals that were associated with the newly established mosques and shrines. Roy is explicit about the intentions of these poets, but he makes no distinction between them and the 'forest pioneers' as Eaton does. He describes them as a 'pioneering band of Muslim Bengali writers' who acted as 'cultural mediators for [the] Bengali Muslims' (1983:8), and, in so doing, 'became...architects of a rich Islamic syncretistic tradition' (2001:189). Roy (1996:103) continues:

The results of their efforts were crystallised into a vast corpus of Muslim Bengali literature, encompassing Islamic religious, semi-religious and secular historical and semi-historical traditions—a distinct tradition that the new cultural ideologues had reconstructed for the Bengali Muslims with its roots firmly extended into the cultural milieu of Bengal.

Little is known of the social background of the so-called 'cultural mediators', Roy (1983:72-3) admits, but it is likely that they were comprised of descendents from immigrant families and local converts. Professionally, while many of these men were engaged as popular religious teachers and spiritual guides, others held secular or religious offices under the local authorities. Whatever their background, the cultural mediators were united in their concern to disseminate Islamic knowledge and tradition among the Bengali Muslim masses. The sense of compulsion in this task is expressed well by one writer, Soiyod Sultan,<sup>20</sup> in an apology for his most famous work, *Nobī-bomīšo* (composed in 1586 A.D.):<sup>21</sup>

Muslims of Bengal, you all listen to me. May you all be engaged in pious deeds to please the Lord. ...The learned who live in the land but do not expound the truth for you are destined to be castigated to hell. Should people commit sins, the learned will be taken to task in the presence of Allāh. I am born in the midst of you and so I have to talk to you about religious matters. Allāh shall accuse: "all you learned ones there did not stop people from committing sins." ...When God calls for you about

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<sup>20</sup> Roy (1983:73) writes that Soiyod Sultan was 'Perhaps the most outstanding writer-mediator...a highly popular and esteemed *pir*, with a great number of disciples... [He] belonged to the noted Mir or Saiyid family of Chakraśālā in the district of Chhattagram [Chittagong].'

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Roy (1983:75).



your good and bad deeds, you may very well plead before Him that you took recourse to your *guru*, who did not warn you. God shall chastise me much more than you. I am ever haunted by this fear, and driven by this, I composed *Nabivamśa* to take people away from sins.

That Soiyod Sultan addresses the 'Muslims of Bengal' shows that 'conversion' (whatever that may have meant) had already taken place.<sup>22</sup> The purpose of Sultan's writing (indeed, the purpose of all the writings of the cultural mediators), was to 'illumine the masses of Bengali Muslims, who were found ill-grounded in their religious tradition and steeped in pre-existing non-Muslim tradition' (Roy 1983:58).

The great concern of the cultural mediators was that the masses, alienated by language and culture, would be absorbed back into Hinduism. Indeed, 'The potent and rather disturbing consequences of the situation arising essentially from the linguistic cleavage,' writes Roy (1983:69), 'namely the inability of Bengali Muslims to follow books in Arabic and Persian,' meant that even though there 'was "no dearth of *kitābs* [religious books] in Arabic and Persian" which were "for the learned alone, and not for the ignorant folk"... [t]he latter were "unable to grasp a single precept of their religion" and "remained immersed in stories and fictions."' He continues:

"In every house the Hindus and Muslims" took themselves "with avid interest" to the Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārat*, rendered into Bengali by Kavindra-paramēśvar in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, and "no-body [thought] about *Khodā* and *Rasul*." The appeal of the other Hindu epic, *Rāmāyan*, to Bengali Muslims was attested by Vrindāvan-dās in the middle of the sixteenth century: the story of Rām was heard "respectfully even by *yavans* [Muslims]" and they were "in tears to hear about the predicament of Śrī Raghunandan [Rām] at the loss of Sitā [Rām's wife]." <sup>23</sup>

Those who had access to the Islamic works in Arabic and Persian, the *asraph*, 'noble' or 'high born' Muslims, the 'learned', not only did not 'expound the truth' for their co-religionists, the *atrāph*, or 'low born', they opposed the cultural mediators in their attempts to do so. The *asraph*'s main objection was the use of Bengali, 'reducing sublime religious truth, enshrined in Arabic and Persian, to a "profane" and "vulgar" local language' (Roy 1983:58). Using Bengali was not easy for the mediators either. In fact, many writers suffered acute agonies of conscience weighing up which was the greater sin, to leave the Bengali Muslims to their fate, or to use the vernacular to warn them. The corpus of Muslim Bengali literature indicates that the former was deemed

<sup>22</sup> At this stage 'conversion' was most likely the formal affiliation of the peasant workers with the mosques and shrines as dependents of the Muslim religious gentry.

<sup>23</sup> The information added in brackets is original.

worse. Bengali was used, but not without much guilt, fear, and apprehension. Shaikh Muttalib, for example, confessed:

I am sure that I have committed a great sin in that I have written the Muslim scriptures in Bengali. But this I am sure of in my heart, that the faithful will understand and bless me. The blessings of the faithful shall involve great virtue, and the merciful Allāh will forgive my sin.<sup>24</sup>

Haji Muhammad revealed a similar conflict of mind:

Do not undertake anything that is forbidden. If you do not abide by the religious injunctions the end is all suffering. I am unable to write in the Hindu script [Bengali] but made an effort to give some knowledge to the people. ...Do not ignore it because of its Hindu script. Why should you ignore the precious matters revealed in Bengali letters? These matters have been expounded by *pirs* and here is a fragment of that knowledge for people to seek at any cost and at any time. Do not feel sick to see it in Bengali language.<sup>25</sup>

Soiyod Sultan was much more 'progressive' in his thinking. He affirmed the value of the mother tongue, acknowledging it as a gift from God and one's 'precious gem'. He added: 'I know from Allāh that He wills to reveal the truth in the particular language of a land. The Prophet speaks one language and the people another. How are we to follow the dialogue, then?'<sup>26</sup> But Sultan's was not the strongest defence for the use of Bengali, this came from Shah Abd al-Hakim:

Whatever language a people speak in a country, God understands that language. God understands all languages, whether the language of the Hindus or the vernacular language of Bengal or any other. ...Those who, being born in Bengal, are averse to Bengali language [*Bangabāni*] cast doubt on their birth. The people, who have no liking for the language and the learning of their country, had better leave it and live abroad. For generations our ancestors have lived in Bengal, and instruction in our native language is, therefore, considered good.<sup>27</sup>

Whether in fear and trembling or with peace of mind, the desire to inform and illumine the masses—to reduce the polarity between the *āśraph* and the *atrāph*—was the controlling motivation of these *puthi* authors. 'The flood-gates of Muslim Bengali literature were thrown open by these new Muslim...mediators,' writes Roy (1983:78), 'and through them poured...waves of literary works of religious import to fertilize the mind of Bengali Muslims for the following centuries.' Although Bengali had become

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Roy (1983:77).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 77. Roy goes on to quote Abd al-Nabi, whom he asserts 'moved a little further: "I am afraid in my heart that God may be angry with me for writing Muslim scriptures in Bengali. But I reject the fear and firmly resolve to write in order to do good to the common people."'

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. The bracketed insertion is Roy's.

the vehicle of communication to the masses,<sup>28</sup> Arabic and Persian retained their status as 'higher' languages, recognised as the conduits through which Islamic religion and culture traditionally flowed.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, many *puṭhis* of this initial phase of Islamisation contained Perso-Arabic words, even though they were clearly acculturated; some even had their introductions or epilogues written in Persian.

But language was not the only obstacle the cultural mediators had to overcome in their desire to bring Islam closer to the Bengali masses, for 'language alone was not capable' of doing so, writes Roy (1983:80). 'If the medium of cultural communication was to be intelligible to the people,' he maintained, 'its idioms and symbols should be no less so.' The mediators were faced with a very large and a very real gulf separating two completely different religious and cultural worldviews—monotheistic Islam, with its doctrines, creeds, and (largely) systematised theology on the one hand; and on the other, an amorphous mix of myths, legends, and superstitions which governed popular beliefs, a 'religion' in which supernatural and real, spirit and matter, were all intermingled and interchangeable. Roy (1983:81-2) suggests that Islam, presented in these forms, as a set of religious observances replete with unfamiliar religious and cultural symbols, could neither satisfy nor engage the needs of a people whose entire cultural world, its values and forms, was 'saturated with the traditions of the *Mahābhārat*, the *Rāmāyan*, Nāthism, and the *mangal-kāvya*, [centring] around the exploits of Manasā, Chandi, Dharma, Śiv, and hosts of minor religious personalities or spirits.'

Translating works directly from Arabic or Persian into Bengali was simply not enough. If these converts were to understand and fully embrace their newly-professed faith (and in the process reject their former allegiances), the cultural mediators would have to contextualise both the message and the means of communicating it. Bringing Islam in line with the cultural traditions of the people would involve diverging from a conservative position. While none of the mediators stated this as their intention, this is exactly what they did. Other than works of a purely didactic or liturgical nature,<sup>30</sup> the

<sup>28</sup> The cultural mediators were not innovators in adopting the Bengali language as their vehicle for communicating religious truths to the masses, nor were the *aśraph* alone in their contempt for it; a precedent had been set some six centuries earlier by the Buddhist *siddhas*, poet-composers of the *corjagīti* or *corjapods*.

<sup>29</sup> Even Shah Abd al-Hakim, one of the most supportive of the Bengali language, admitted that 'Arabic learning is the best of all. If you cannot learn Arabic, learn Persian to become aware of what is good in the end. Should you find yourself unable to master Persian, you must study the scriptures in your own language' (quoted in Roy 1983:78).

<sup>30</sup> Roy (1983:82) lists prayers, ablutions, the ceremonial bath, fasting during *Ramadan*, purification by sand, and funerals as the kinds of matters dealt with in these types of works.

vast majority of their literary efforts were thoroughly syncretistic and permeated with pre-Islamic religious and cultural concepts, idioms, nuances, and symbols, even those which alleged to be translations of specific Arabic or Persian works. Roy categorises the contributions of the cultural mediators under three headings: historical-mythical, cosmogonical-cosmological, and mystical-esoterical.<sup>31</sup> Grouped together, these three categories form what Roy terms (following Singer): ‘the syncretistic great tradition’, a corpus of texts which he contrasts with ‘the syncretistic little tradition’ on the bases of authorship, literary sophistication, and content. Despite their differences, ‘The object of both [traditions] was the ultimate vindication, refurbishing, and diffusion of Islam as they interpreted it’ (Roy 1983:207).

Compositionally, the poets of both traditions adopted what literary forms were available to them—short lyrical songs of ‘*vaiṣṇav* origin’ and long narrative poems of the *moṅgol-kabýo* or *pācali* traditions.<sup>32</sup> An examination of the latter, Roy (1983:87) writes, reveals a ‘total correspondence in both *form* and *spirit*’ (emphasis mine) to the epic narratives of Muslim Bengali authorship. In terms of *form*, they were composed using the same two poetic metres—*poṃar* and *tripodī*.<sup>33</sup> Roy (1983:87-8) provides an intriguing description of the way and the context in which each metre was performed:

The *pāṃar* couplets, which formed the bulk and helped to forward the story, were musically recited by the principal singer, generally called *mul-gāyan*, or *bayāti*, by Muslims of the eastern Bengal. The songs in *tripadī* and also in *payār*, known as *nācādi* or dance-style, were sung by the principal singer, supported by the associated singers, known as *dohār* or *pāli* or *pāl-dohār*. The leading singer recited or sang the story and passed on the refrain (*dhuyā*) to his men, who repeated it in chorus. He wore a bell-anklet and a wristlet, carried a chowrie in his right hand, a pair of small cup-cymbals in the left, and a small drum, *khanjani* or *khanjuri*, made of lizard skin and tied under his left arm.

There is nothing in Roy’s thesis to suggest that the Muslim cultural mediators adopted the poetic forms of the *moṅgol-kabýo*, or *pācali* traditions, but not their performance-styles. Yet the description above—apart from the recitation of *poṃar*—resonates more with *jarīgan* performance than it does with *puthi-poṃa*.<sup>34</sup> It is particularly significant

<sup>31</sup> See Roy (1983:87-206). Although individual *puthis* may fall mainly under one or other of these three categories, they are not mutually exclusive. A historical-mythical narrative, for example, may also have esoterical or cosmogonical referents.

<sup>32</sup> Although Roy does not make this point explicit, he implies that epic narrative poems and short lyrical songs were the only two literary forms available.

<sup>33</sup> These poetic metres will be explained and their use discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup> It is also almost an exact description of the performance of *Podmo-Puraṇ* I attended in Rajnógor, Moulvibazar, Sylhet.

in this context, therefore, that Dunham (1997:45-50) describes *pācali*, *moṅgol-kabýo*, and *bijoy-kabýo*, separately from *puthi-pora* when she looks at each in relation to the origins of *jarīgan*. In one place, she writes that ‘the *mangalas* and *vijayas*’ were the probable basis for *jarīgan*’s poetic form, and notes that ‘the same leader-*cum*-chorus format’ of *jarīgan* performances is also found in *pācali*. In sections describing *puthi-pora*, however, while Dunham acknowledges that the themes of *jarīgan* poetry may constitute a ‘sub-class’ of the *puthi*-literature, she is at pains to differentiate them in respect to composition and performance-style, as we noted above. But this creates the impression that *puthi-pora* had origins apart from these traditions, which is at odds with Roy’s description. Nevertheless, the differences need to be accounted for. This will be considered in chapter 3.

In terms of *spirit*, the Muslim texts also paralleled the themes of the *moṅgol-kabýo* literature, whose religious expressions glorified the exploits of popular deities and deified heroes. The cultural mediators focused, therefore, on the activities of Islamic historical, legendary and mythical heroes, the effect of which, Roy (1983:88) suggests, ‘seemed to wean Muslims away from *mangal*-literature by creating for them in Bengali an Islamic substitute based on Muslim history and myth.’ Muslim heroes and heroines were either substituted for *mangal*-deities, or placed in superior positions in the world of the *mangal*-pantheon. Narratives centred on the Prophet Muhammad, his descendants and followers, and, in order to ‘cater to the popular demand for the supernatural, miraculous, and fantastic’, writes Roy (1983:88-9), these accounts were ‘embroidered lavishly with fictitious adventures and exploits to reduce them to some replicas of their *mangal* counterparts.’ Romantic narratives were also introduced by the mediators based on Perso-Arabic and even Indian themes, similarly acculturated to the religious-cultural milieu of Bengal.

The other literary form adopted by Muslim poets was the short lyrical songs of ‘*vaiṣṇav* origin’. Roy (1983:188) grants that ‘the entire atmosphere of this literature is saturated with [the] characters, places, objects, symbols, and nuances, characteristic of *vaiṣṇav* tradition and of *vaiṣṇav* lyrical literature’, but he nevertheless condemns ‘any facile assumption of the *vaiṣṇav* identity of this literature and [of] their authors’, an allegation levelled at the Hindu commentators. He (1983:189) also condemns Muslim critics, such as Haq, who are ‘predisposed to attach nothing more than allegorical and symbolic meanings to these mystical compositions’, who view ‘the Muslim *pada* as



essentially sufic in spirit', and characterise 'the totality of the Bengali literature on *Gaudiya* (Bengali) vaiṣṇavism as "fully impregnated with the spirit of *sufi* literature" under "a Hinduistic vaneer.'" Haq's (1975:268-81) understanding of the Vaishnavism of Chaitanya, based on the assimilation of Islamic thought and devotional practice, seems to Roy to be 'grossly uncritical and oversimplified.'<sup>35</sup> The complex interactions between Islamic and Hindu mysticism (both in Bengal Vaishnavism and the medieval *bhakti* movement more generally) lead Roy (1983:193) to conclude that neither one of 'the two extremes and conflicting views on the nature of the Muslim *pada* literature—the *vaiṣṇav* and the sufic view—can...be exclusively adopted.'<sup>36</sup>

This conclusion can also apply to the origins of the music and the performance style of these lyrical songs, of which *kīrton*—Bengali Vaishnava devotional songs in praise of Krishna (generally attributed to Chaitanya)—is its chief genre. Haq (1975:280) states that *kīrton* 'perfectly resembles the Ṣūfī performance of *Ḥalqah*' which he defines as 'an assembly of persons [that meet] together for the purpose of devotional exercises through the medium of *dhikr* [*jikr* or *zikr*] accompanied by *sama* or musical performance.' He concludes that because

this kind of devotional performance was made familiar to the people of Bengal long before the birth of Chaitanya Deva [by Chishti and Suhrawardi saints]... [it] is...not unreasonable to hold that the Ṣūfī performance of *Ḥalqah* was the immediate and real source from which Chaitanya Deva drew inspiration for and made the idea of initiating a novel devotional performance like *Kīrtana* [*kīrton*].

Roy (1983:192-3) disagrees. He sees no novelty in *kīrton*, suggesting that the practice of singing the name of God to the accompaniment of music and dance (*nam-kīrton*) had 'clear precedent in the devotional exercises, involving song, dance and ecstasy of the southern *vaiṣṇav* Ālvārs',<sup>37</sup> and that the practice of congregational hymn singing (*soṇi-kīrton*) had precedent in the '*Bhāgavat-purāṇ*'. Despite their similarities, *nam-kīrton* and *zikr* historically have completely distinct origins.

Chatterji (2002:126) also points to the local origins of Vaishnava lyric poetry, but more generally. In reference to Jaya Deva's *Gīta Govinda*, he states: 'The style of

<sup>35</sup> Roy (1983:194) also criticises Dimock, Jr.'s (1969) classification of the literature, not for its simplicity, but as 'diffuse, overlapping, and inadequate in providing for a clear basis of differentiation.'

<sup>36</sup> It can still be noted, though, that 'The most dominant feature of the *pada* literature of both Hindu and Muslim authorship is the element of love binding the devotee and the deity' (Roy 1983:197).

<sup>37</sup> It is to this mainstream Hindu *bhakti* tradition that Roy (1983:190-2) argues the Bengal Vaishnavism of Chaitanya owes its origins, rather than to the later movement which 'was, in essence, syncretistic, cosmopolitan, and more populist' and which 'drew as much upon sufic as on indigenous devotional mysticism.'

the songs had an enormous influence on the Bengali lyric' and 'together with the poets of the Caryās, [Jaya Deva] stands at the head of Vaiṣṇava and other lyric poetry in Bengal'. Ghosh (1976:28) also asserts that any 'account of Bengali literature should properly begin with the *Gita Govinda* of Jaya Deva, because, although [it was composed in] Sanskrit, it has enjoyed great popularity and influence in Bengal.' He, likewise, goes on to note the impact of the *corāgāti* or *corāpods*—songs composed by Buddhist *siddhas* 'of the Sahajiyā sect' (Chatterji 2002:110), between the seventh and twelfth centuries (cf. Roy 1983:79, fn.69), which are claimed by some to be 'the oldest specimens...of Bengali poetry' (Moudud 1992:1). Ghosh writes: 'The musical and mystical character of Bengali literature fully appears in [these]...'

Whatever the particulars of their origins, Dunham (1997:46) states that *kīrtons* 'influenced most of the important genres of Bengali folk songs, including, I am sure, the *jarigan* style of performance and singing.' This is significant, not least because of the similar claims she makes of *pācali* noted above. But if *kīrtan* is such an influential genre, of greater significance is its likely influence on the lyrical songs found in many of the *puthis*. Although there are many varieties of *kīrtan*,<sup>38</sup> Dunham (1997:46) states that all 'The texts...emphasize devotion to God through the analogy of human love' and that 'The poetry and music are highly lyrical. This lyricism', she states further, 'is said to be the main influence on *bhatiyali* and Baul songs', two genres of Bengali folk song listed in the titles of some of the *puthis*-songs.<sup>39</sup> In his thesis, Seal (1993: 24, 28-9) describes the performance of *kīrtan* as follows:<sup>40</sup>

The leader explains and enlivens the audience with a well-knit story both by songs and speech. More than ten people may be included in a chorus. *Khol*, *mandira*, *khanjani* and harmonium are included in the ensemble... Normally there are three singers in *padavali kirtan*; i.e., "*mulgayaka* (chief-singer), on his right the *shira-dohar* (main co-singer) and on the left the *kola-dohar* (another co-singer)" ...*Doha* is a two line rhyming poem. *Dohar* is one who recites *doha* or poetry. In the context of *kirtan*, *dohar* is the refrainer, one who helps the main singer by repeating the lines or reminding him of the songs while singing.

<sup>38</sup> See Chatterjee (1996:108-41).

<sup>39</sup> The connection made here between *kīrtan* and Baul-gan is interesting, particularly as Capwell (1986:33) traces the 'structure and the similarity in textual style and mystical meaning' of Baul-gan to the *corāpods* which 'are [their] predecessors'. This is another (albeit indirect) affirmation of the significance of the *corāpods* in the development, not only of the Bengali language, but also of Bengali music.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Dunham (1997:47).

The similarities between this description of *kīrton* and Roy's description of *mongol-kabyō* and *pācali* are plain, particularly the references to '*khanjani*', '*mulgayaka*', and '*dohar*'. This indicates a perhaps inevitable overlap in the performance-styles of the long narrative poems and short lyrical songs. But, as noted above, why neither exactly describes the Muslim expression of *puthi-poṛa* as found today, will be considered in chapter 3. The question of whether or not the *puthi-poṛa* repertoire contains both long narrative poems and short lyrical songs will be discussed in chapter 4.

What has been described in this section so far relates, in particular, to the early Muslim Bengali literature of the syncretistic tradition. Here, even though the message of Islam was exogenous, it was presented in a wholly familiar way; a powerful mix of the vernacular language expressed through pre-Islamic literary and linguistic forms—poetic, thematic, idiomatic and symbolic. This surely goes some way to answering the *how* of Islamisation in its first phase; how Islamic ideals 'seeped' into Bengali culture and became acculturated. But this is only half the story. How did the largely illiterate Bengali masses access this literature? Public performance is clearly implied in Roy's description of *mongol-kabyō* above, but he does not emphasise it. In fact, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Roy's seminal work, only has one other reference to performance in over 250 pages.<sup>41</sup> If I am correct in identifying the performance of this literature (or a part of it) with *puthi-poṛa*, then aside from its own ethnographic value, a description and analysis of this tradition will, perhaps, bring us closer to discovering the 'precise way' in which Islamisation took place, and to discerning the 'mechanics' of the processes involved.

### *Puthis of the Reform Movements*

Before we begin to look at *puthi-poṛa* in its contemporary context, however, we need to consider, more briefly, the *how* of Islamisation in its second phase; both the means used by the reformers in their purificatory campaigns against the syncretistic tradition, and the affect this had on the latter. From what we considered in the previous section, the reform movements clearly had an impact on the syncretistic tradition, even if they only affected the religious lives of the Muslim majority in a superficial way. In terms

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<sup>41</sup> This reference appears in the context of the syncretistic 'little' tradition and the cult of *pīr*. Here Roy (1983:235) writes: 'These folk ballads on *pīrs* were meant for singing and recitation, accompanied by music, in the village gatherings attended by both Muslims and Hindus. The particular *pīr* was offered *shirni*, and at the conclusion of the song the food offered to the *pīr* was shared by the participants.'



of their effect on the literature of the syncretistic tradition, however, Roy (2001:209-10) notes a progressive decline in its quantity and quality. The reason was twofold—the development of a ‘new variety’ of Islamic *puṭhi* and the emergence of prose:

The new and growing Islamic consciousness steadily challenged aspects of the syncretistic tradition as reflected most clearly in the progressive decline, both in quantity and quality, of the rich and time-honoured syncretistic literary output. A new variety of ‘Islamic *puṭhi*’, using rather contrived concoctions of Urdu-Bengali dictions, proliferated in its place, while the more literate Bengalis increasingly turned to a new literature of historical, biographical and polemical nature, written not in verse...but in the newly developed modern prose. The syncretistic performer seemed to have lost both his stage and audience.

One might have assumed, in view of the antipathy of the reformers toward the syncretistic tradition (its institutions, proponents and practices), that the former would have used more ‘Islamic’ means to mount their attack on the latter. Prose was adopted by the educated,<sup>42</sup> but it was the *puṭhi* which the reformers used as their chief means of communication to the masses. There were significant differences, though, between this ‘new variety’ of Islamic *puṭhi* and the *puṭhis* which characterised the syncretistic tradition. Like the cultural mediators, the reformers had to adopt the Bengali language in order for their message to be accessible to the masses, but they did all they could to ‘Islamize and Urdu-ize’ it (Ahmed 1988:120). Although Perso-Arabic vocabulary had been liberally employed by the cultural mediators, the reformers took it to a different level. What Roy describes as ‘rather contrived concoctions of Urdu-Bengali dictions’ became known as ‘Musalmāni Bengali’ (Muslim Bengali).

It was not just language that was affected though. In contrast to the syncretistic literature, which was deeply rooted in the local culture, these new Islamic *puṭhis* were full of pan-Islamic symbolism. In their pursuit of an ‘Islamic dream world’, located in the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish tales of romance and heroism, ‘To abjure all that was local and Bengali was a necessary first step’ in raising ‘the benighted Bengali Muslim to the trans-Indian heights of Islamic rectitude’ (Ahmed 1988:108). This involved, not only the substitution of Hindu religious symbols for Islamic ones, but the purging of just about every aspect of local culture from them. Chatterji (2002:211-12) notes this latter point with utter contempt:

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<sup>42</sup> Not that prose was particularly ‘Islamic’ of course. According to Chatterji (2002:134), it was the advent of Western learning that precipitated the demand for Bengali prose, and, for the first half of the nineteenth century, ‘the literary language [was] under the tyranny of Sanskrit.’

Books in 'Musalmānī Bengali' begin from the right side, following the way of an Arabic or Persian book, although the alphabet [script] is Bengali. The literature in Musalmānī Bengali has no merit, and some of the deathless tales of pre-Moslem Persia, as in the 'Shāh-nāmāh,' and of early Islām, have been ruined by the hack versifiers of Calcutta and Chittagong in rendering them in this jargon. The culture which is native to Bengali village life, Hindu and Moslem, is often entirely crushed out of it...

Such comments one may expect from a Hindu author, but, in fairness, Chatterji makes his case on linguistic and literary rather than religious grounds. Ahmed (1988:84-5), a Muslim, also writes that these '*nasihat namahs* (Manuals of Religious Instruction)',<sup>43</sup> as they were more commonly known, 'are artless, simple and direct', but he does state the caveat of intent (1988:90):

The importance of the *nasihat namahs* was not always appreciated by the educated Muslims who were put off by their crudity of expression and pidgin Bengali. They were often inclined to treat these as yet another body of '*battala puthis*'<sup>44</sup> of no literary merit. Such a view, however, was unfair to the authors' central concern, which was to instruct the masses and not literary ambition.

The concern of instructing the Bengali Muslim masses was shared by the poets of the syncretistic tradition as we have already seen. Whether or not they had 'literary ambition' is debatable;<sup>45</sup> yet, in their attempts to 'wean Muslims away from *mangal*-literature by creating for them...an Islamic substitute' (Roy 1983:88), their substitutes had to match the 'quality' of what was already popularly in existence. The reformers, however, who were clearly not interested in pandering to popular tastes, appealed to the Qur'an as the only spiritual guide for Muslims. Apart from their adaptations of the romantic and heroic tales from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish (a more orthodox Islamic substitution of those written earlier, perhaps), the reformers' *puthi* literature consisted primarily of didactic tracts which covered a range of subjects, such as, "The Faith of Islam", "[The] Rules of Islam", and "Instruction in Religion". Guides to prayer and ablution, and how to repeat passages from the Koran, are numerous, as are books dealing with Iblis [Satan], Death, Resurrection of the dead, and the last Judgement'

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<sup>43</sup> '*Nasihat namahs*' was the common term for the 'cheap religious books' that proliferated from the early nineteenth century (Ahmed 1988:84). Although Ahmed does not state that these books are *puthis* directly, it is to be assumed. For, the term *puthi*, as we have already seen, 'came to be associated with a particular genre composed in verse' (Ahmed 1988:xx). '*Nasihat namahs*' was just a descriptive term.

<sup>44</sup> '*Battala*, lit. "under the banyan tree", was an area of Calcutta where cheap popular literature was printed and sold. This place-name came to be equated in Bengal with very low-brow and vulgar publications' (Ahmed 1988:217, note 89). Here, again, we see a link made between these '*puthis*' and the '*nasihat namahs*'.

<sup>45</sup> In the light of comments such as Soiyod Sultan's above, it would appear that he and others like him were driven by compulsion not ambition.

(Tackle, in Ahmed 1988:xxii). These tracts were often polemical in nature, and were directed principally against the institution of *pīrism* and all those associated with it.

But the latter did not respond to such attacks with silence. Although they were not opposed to all that the reformers stood for, the cultural mediators, or traditionalist Mullahs and *pīrs* (as Ahmed terms them), felt impelled to mount a counter-attack to explain and defend their position. This ‘new variety’ of Islamic *puthi*, composed in ‘Musalmāni Bengali’, was their primary means of communication. They ‘were on sale in “nearly every village market”’, notes Ahmed (1988:xxii), ‘and could be obtained at an “astonishingly cheap price”’. Having first asked what value the *puthis* would have been to the illiterate, he goes on to say:

Probably, many rural Muslims bought these tracts in the absence of an appropriate religious work in Bengali. Others, who knew the rudiments of the language, bought it for their own use. Occasionally, the village *mullah* would, as part of his programme of Islamization, read out passages from a tract to those who gathered round him.

Here we get the first and only reference to performance. It is not obvious from this quote, however, whether the reformers are also in mind here, or whether Ahmed is just referring to the practice of the traditionalist Mullahs. We are also not told how they read these passages out, whether their readings were ‘musical’ or not. Bearing in mind that these *puthis* were composed ‘in verse’ (Ahmed 1988:xx), there is no reason to believe otherwise. In view of how much the literature of this period contrasts with that of the syncretistic tradition, though, it is very interesting to discover that in terms of poetic form they were the same—pre-Islamic! As Chatterji (2002:210-11) remarks, again with disdain:

The Musalmānī Bengali employed in these works...is often too much Persianised; *but the metres are Bengali*, and a large percentage of Sanskrit words are retained, cheek by jowl with the Perso-Arabic importations [emphasis mine].

Like their decision to use the Bengali language, perhaps this was just another instance of reformist pragmatism, in which form was subservient to purpose—communicating the message. Yes, the reformers used other methods too, but nothing could compete with the *puthi* in its appeal to the rural masses. In fact, so great was their appeal to the ‘ordinary people’, says Ahmed (1988:xxi), ‘that even the Christian missionaries found it necessary to take recourse to the style and language of the Musalmāni *puthis* in their urge to convey the message of Christ to the Muslim masses of Bengal.’

To summarise, it is evident that the cultural mediators and the reformers had the same definitive aim—instructing the Bengali Muslim masses. What Roy (1983:207) says of the literature of the syncretistic ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions could easily be extended here; that ‘The object of both was the ultimate vindication, refurbishing, and diffusion of Islam *as they interpreted it*’ (emphasis mine). Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, this was the exclusive concern of the syncretistic Mullahs or *pīrs*. While they received a measure of opposition from the *āsrāph*, this did not alter their course—the construction of an acculturated tradition of Islam through the writing of Islamic *puthis* over some three centuries. But the religious climate suddenly and irrevocably changed with the coming of the reform movements. For the first time, the syncretistic Mullahs and *pīrs* and the institutions which supported them were challenged to their very core. Both sides fought a polemic battle to maintain their own positions and to win over the peasant masses—again, through the writing of *puthis*, but altered in language, idiom, and, particularly, content. It was not until the latter part of the twentieth century, ‘with the gradual spread of education in rural areas,’ writes Ahmed (1988:xxii), that *puthis* ‘came to be replaced by more authoritative works on Islam written in modern Bengali prose.’ Yet, as the following pages show, this replacement was not absolute.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

This chapter has examined the existing descriptions of *puthi-pora*, outlined two of the key phases in the Islamisation of Bengal, and considered the vital role of the Muslim Bengali literature as a repository of the Islamic message. The connections between all three sections should now be clear. *Puthi-pora*, the reading of *puthis*, is one ‘precise’ way in which the Islamic message—be it the acculturation of the cultural mediators or the pan-Islamism of the reformers—was spread in Bengal from (at least) the sixteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Although the *spirit* of the *puthis* changed greatly between the two phases of Islamisation the *form* did not. Verse, as used in narrative and didactic texts especially, was employed by mediator and reformer alike. Through the diffusion of papermaking technology followed by the establishing of the printing press, *puthis*—manuscript and printed—became increasingly available. But due to such high levels of illiteracy, the

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<sup>46</sup> I say ‘one’ way because there were undoubtedly others. However, because the connection between Islamisation and the Muslim Bengali literature is so strong, *puthi-pora* must have played a key role.

Muslim masses depended on others communicating the *puthi*-texts to them; hence the need for *puthi-poṛa* in the context of public performance.

Themes surrounding Islamisation in Bengal and the Muslim Bengali literature are well represented in the secondary sources, but *puthi-poṛa* is not—either generally (seen in the first section), or in the specific context of the spread of Islam (evinced in the last two). This research is necessary, then, both to provide an adequate description of *puthi-poṛa* as a contemporary performance tradition, and to understand the Muslim expression of this tradition in its proper historical context. The latter has begun with this chapter. Where relevant, parallels to the performance of Hindu Bengali narrative traditions will be suggested in the context of the question, ‘what *is* it about *puthi-poṛa* that *would* have made it such a powerful vehicle for Islamisation?’ We begin first, though, in seeking to understand the contemporary context, by looking at descriptions of a public *puthi-poṛa* performance event, witnessed in March 2005.

## Processing Performance: Locating Categories and Schemas in a *Puthi-Pora* Event

*Lull'd in the countless chambers of the brain,  
Our thoughts are link'd by many a hidden chain.  
Awake but one, and lo, what myriads rise!  
Each stamps its image as the other flies!*  
Samuel Rogers, 1763-1855.

Apart from making some initial contacts during my time of Sylheti language learning in 2002 and 2003, I did not begin fieldwork 'proper' until 2005, when I spent eight months in Sylhet. Although I had decided to adopt a synthetic-heuristic method in data collection, I nevertheless had clear ideas about what I wanted to observe and record. My goal was to witness and document *puthi-pora* in a 'normal' performance context. With my 'shadow' cast over everything I saw (Barz and Cooley, eds. 1997), however, I was conscious that my presence would always render an event 'abnormal', even before I began observing it (regardless of how much I stressed to the organisers that I did not want anything done for *my* benefit). Short of not attending performance events at all (which I had considered),<sup>1</sup> I had little choice but to factor in my 'shadow' and try and have as little effect on proceedings as possible. My desire to write a representative ethnography, however, and, therefore, to observe *as-normal-an-event-as-possible* remained. Being a cultural-outsider and non-initiate, though, how could I know what was 'normal' and what was not?

My instinctive response to this observational challenge was to attend as many *puthi-pora* occasions as possible, to compare their details and look for the similarities. This, I believed, would enable me to construct a general understanding of the tradition

<sup>1</sup> I toyed with the idea of sending my research assistant to observe events on my behalf, particularly in the early stages of fieldwork. In fact, I did do this on one occasion, sending Biplob Nandi to the Zinda Bazar Aśrom (Vaishnava temple), in Sylhet Town, to see if *Śrī Śrī Coiton'yo Coritamrito* (Chaitanya's biography) was read as part of the weekly worship service as claimed. It was. Knowing now that this book would not just be read for my benefit, I attended with Biplob the following week, bringing all my recording equipment (with permission).

that I would be able to represent ethnographically. To aid me in this task, I decided to hire a research assistant, a cultural-insider with experience of the Sylheti music scene, to help me locate *puthi*-readers, to organise occasions on which to record them, to accompany me on these occasions, and to help me to interpret my experiences. This individual would need to be fluent in both Sylheti and English in order to interact with the *puthi*-readers and me during performances and during interviews at a later stage. Through my language school, I advertised for such a person in the local newspapers and received a surprisingly high number of responses. But only two applicants stood out prominently: Nazrul Islam and Biplob Nandi.

Although Nazrul was a British-Sylheti—in his own words, an ‘insider/outsider ...one and [the] other at the same time’—and not a musician, his personal interest in the music and traditions of his own culture, as well as his enthusiasm for the job, led me to hire him on a full-time basis. Biplob was a cultural-insider and a musician, but, being a Hindu, his experience was primarily of the Hindu context. He was also only available part-time. Nevertheless, I did hire him when Nazrul had to return to London, taking the opportunity to draw on Biplob’s experience to investigate parallel traditions of Hindu recitation. One other individual, whom I did not hire as a research assistant but who assisted me greatly, was Mujibur Rahman. ‘Mujib’ was the caretaker of the flat my wife and I were renting, but his contribution to my research, in locating the *puthis* and *puthi*-readers in his home area, was huge. All of these men helped to make my research possible. Because of Mujib and Nazrul,<sup>2</sup> I was able to observe and record what I did of the Muslim tradition of *puthi-pora*; through Mujib and Biplob, I had the opportunity to observe and record parallel Hindu traditions.

This chapter looks in detail at one of the *puthi-pora* events that took place in a village near Mujib’s home. The reason for focusing on just one event is twofold: first, it meets the primary aim of the study—documenting and describing a *specific* instance of *puthi-pora* as performed in Sylhet today; second, by locating the ‘categories’ and ‘schemas’ in this single event, the process by which I have constructed my *general* understanding of the tradition (how I have attempted to determine what is ‘normal’ and what is not) will be made clear. The details elicited from this one event, will be compared with the details of other, similarly documented, events in chapters 3 and 4

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<sup>2</sup> Nazrul was my point of contact, but he utilised his own contacts to locate *puthi*-readers and organise occasions in which to record them. Abdur Rahman, Nazrul’s cousin, went to a huge amount of effort on his behalf and, therefore, his contribution must be acknowledged.

(and in the light of interview data), to see what is similar in all of them. This chapter is a point of departure, then, the contextual foundation for all that follows. But it does not just apply to ethnography (even though ethnography is its clear focus); these same details will later be discussed in relation to the hypothesis, in attempting to answer the historical question: ‘What *is* it about *puthi-pora* that would have made it so powerful a vehicle for Islamisation?’

In processing this one performance event, I have combined two different, but complementary tools: ‘schema theory’ and ‘fieldwork methods’. Before we consider the event itself, then, it is necessary first to explain the relevance of using the schema concept in analysing performance. This will be followed by an explanation of how I have integrated schema theory with fieldwork methods in order to locate and elicit the categories and schemas that constitute its details.

### *The Relevance of the Schema Concept in Analysing Performance*

Schema theory was briefly explained in the thesis introduction. Schemas, according to Snyder (2000:95-6), are abstract memory ‘frameworks’, ‘large patterns of generalized associations in memory that determine how whole situations are processed’. They ‘function as norms or sets of ideas about how things *usually* are, and allow us to move through situations without having to repeatedly consciously evaluate every detail and its meaning: they operate unconsciously to contextualize current experience.’

The challenge I faced in observing *puthi-pora* was that I had had no previous experience of the tradition. I had no framework to contextualise my observations, no ‘patterns of generalized associations’ built up from repeated exposure, and, therefore, no sense of ‘how things *usually* are’. If understanding is dependent upon selecting the *right* schema to process a *specific* situation, as Snyder (2000:96) suggests, because I did not have a *puthi-pora* schema (nor any of the broader Sylheti-Bengali musico-cultural schemas that the *puthi*-readers and the regular audience attendees would have had in which to place this schema), I would have to generate one. This would involve a conscious evaluation of ‘every detail and its meaning’ from the limited number of events that I might be able to attend.

Although I was unaware of the operation of this cognitive process at the time, by attending what *puthi-pora* occasions I could, and by consciously comparing their details to look for similarities, I was instinctively constructing a *puthi-pora* schema. I



did not need schema theory to tell me what to do, or how to go about doing it; nor is this what schema theory does. It is not a prescriptive method, but a descriptive theory. It helps to explain the processes involved in human cognition rather than to stipulate a system of learning. My interest in using schema theory in performance analysis, then, was to provide me with a conceptual foundation, both for knowing and for describing how I arrived at my understanding of *puthi-pora*. Because schemas represent whole situations within abstract frameworks, being ‘based on what similar situations have in common’ (Snyder 2000:95-97), the concept seemed appropriate to use in my analysis of whole *puthi-pora* events.

Like all performance, *puthi-pora* consists of temporal event sequences. Being able to discern both what these events are and the order in which they occur is key to processing a performance correctly, and, therefore, to understanding the whole. To do this successfully, however, it is important to be familiar with more than just the event sequence itself. There are other associated elements, or ‘categories’, that must also be recognised. ‘Categories are the basic units into which we organise our perceptions of the world’ (Widdess 2007:11). They are the “‘slots” of which a schema is composed’ (Snyder 2000:95), or, put the other way, ‘schemas are large networks of [categories] with...associative connections’ (Snyder 2000:96). In the restaurant schema referred to in the introduction, these categories included tables, chairs, a waiter or waitress, the bill, the cash register, and so on. Without knowing what these categories are, and how to interact with them, the process of ordering, eating, and paying the bill (which make up some of the temporal events), would be fraught.

And so it is with performance. If *puthi-pora* is to be understood, or processed, correctly, it is imperative to know (a) what the sequence of events are that constitute a performance, and (b) what instances of categories are associated with these events. As schemas are constructed from common elements in similar situations, they are flexible within certain parameters. This flexibility is vital as no two situations are ever exactly the same in every respect. Therefore, an important part of the analytical process will be to distinguish between those features in the performance that are *usual* (or normal), from those that are *unusual* (or novel). This, in turn, is only possible by comparing two or more performances. As mentioned above, the comparative process will be initiated in chapters 3 and 4. In this chapter, as the title states, my intention is to locate

the categories and schemas<sup>3</sup> in just *one puthi-pora* event. As a tool, schema theory will be used in the analysis of this one event, to explicate the process by which I have determined the categories and schemas that will be compared in all events, and how I have come to understand their relationships within a connected, holistic, and abstract framework. But how does one approach analysing performance? To what should this schematic tool be applied?

### *'Fieldnotes': Observational Data for Schematic Analysis*

For every *puthi-pora* event I attended, as well as using audio, visual, and audio-visual methods of recording, I wrote 'fieldnotes'. In this, I was influenced by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and Barz (1997a) who champion the use of fieldnotes as a means of recording observational data. They note that fieldnotes can be used for more than the simple documentation of specific events, however, they can be used to act as 'a running account of the conduct of research' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:192)—a 'daily...dialogue', or 'outlet for introspection' (Barz 1997:51). I used fieldnotes in both ways. For every event that I attended, I have 'Real-Time Observations'<sup>4</sup> of that event plus a narrative fieldnote account written as part of my daily, introspective dialogue. As well as noting my own observations, I was intrigued by an idea in Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 163), of using 'indigenous written accounts', 'draw[ing] on the ability of informants to generate written accounts...for research purposes.' It would be too much to ask the *puthi*-readers to do this, I decided (not least because they would be unable to generate written accounts in English), so I asked Nazrul.

At the time of writing them, I did not think that these fieldnotes would actually be included in this thesis. They were always going to provide a key data source in my analysis of *puthi-pora*, but never be seen. I became convinced, however, that, in order to write a representative ethnography, I would have to be clear about what I know and how I came to know it. Because 'Notes written in the field affect perception, memory, and interpretation and are a part of an individual's way of knowing (what do we know about musical performance?) and process (how do we know it?)' (Barz 1997:45), it

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<sup>3</sup> I have used 'schemas' in the plural because even if there is one overarching *puthi-pora* meta-schema, this meta-schema will be comprised of other schemas and sub-schemas, each with their own groups of categories and sub-categories.

<sup>4</sup> My 'Real-Time Observations' (hereafter, RTO) are the notes that I made during specific performance events which were linked to the time-counter on my Tascam DA-P1 DAT recorder.

seemed appropriate to respond to Barz's (1997:46) call 'for the inclusion of fieldnotes in our ethnographies', so that the processes involved in answering the epistemological questions "'What do I know?" and "How can I know what I know?"', would be as transparent as possible, and that my individual experience, revealed in my fieldnotes, could be continually re-evaluated by whomever might wish to do so.

The fact that this process is based upon an individual's way of knowing may sound as if it is rather subjective. It is! But this is the nature of qualitative research, and I do not intend (or desire) to conceal or write this subjectivity away. In an attempt to balance my idiosyncratic perspective, however, I have taken Barz's proposition one stage further: to include Nazrul's fieldnotes in my ethnography, along with my own. Hence, our two individually-texted experiences of this one *puthi-pora* event provide the observational data for schematic analysis in this chapter—mine, as a total cultural outsider, and Nazrul's, as an 'insider/outsider...one and [the] other at the same time... British/Bengali (Sylheti).' Using schema theory as a tool to analyse these data takes the epistemological pursuit to a higher cognitive level. It provides a conceptual basis for describing the processes involved in knowing what I know and knowing how I know it, as well as a system for analysing them. Inasmuch as this analysis is based on a process of induction, it will elucidate the interaction between experience, reflection, and interpretation that Barz (1997:53-5) seeks to encourage.

### **'Texting' the Event: Wednesday, March 9, 2005**

The event chosen for analysis took place in the village of Horipur, Jointapur, Sylhet, on Wednesday night, March 9, 2005. The choice of this particular event for analysis was not made arbitrarily. It was the third of three *puthi-pora* events attended in the space of three weeks in a similar geographical area. As such, it precipitated a certain amount of reflection made in the light of the previous two events, as well as raising a number of questions. While both of our accounts are focused on the documentation of this specific event, they are the most comparative of the three. For these reasons, then, these two full and largely unedited fieldnote accounts provide the most tangible bases and suitable points of departure for locating and eliciting categories and schemas from a whole *puthi-pora* event.

I have adopted Barz's (1997:46) 'three-voice' format in presenting my account of this event. The first voice is represented by '*italic typeface*' to represent the initial

fieldnote' written 'while still in the field'.<sup>5</sup> The second voice (also written 'while...in the field') is more reflective, 'often an inscribed form of...a memory associated with a specific field experience...' It is 'represented in capital and small capital letters'.<sup>6</sup> The third voice is 'more analytical and removed from the first two field voices'. It is 'represented by a roman typeface [within square brackets], [and] illustrates my interaction with my field notes "out of the field"'. Nazrul's account, of course, is a distinctly independent voice from my own. While it also shows the implicit use of these first two voices, because Nazrul has not interacted with his account 'out of the field' it has been left, as written, in roman typeface.<sup>7</sup> One further voice is heard in this chapter (which is even more analytical and removed than the third voice), a voice that compares and contrasts both accounts in order to elicit categories and schemas. It is this voice that comprises the substance of this chapter.

The chapter will proceed by presenting these two accounts in juxtaposition—mine (**DK:**) followed by Nazrul's (**NI:**)—dividing them into chronologically discrete sections and analysing them in the way described above. There are nine such sections: 1-3 act as a kind of prologue, documenting the events before the performance begins; 4-7 describe and reflect upon the main element of the performance, *puthi-pora* itself; section 8 presents an additional element, songs; section 9 acts as a kind of epilogue, concluding with final thoughts and observations. After each section has received due consideration, all of the categories and schemas located throughout these nine sections will be grouped thematically and represented in schematic diagrams to show how they relate to each other within connected frameworks.

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<sup>5</sup> Barz uses the present tense to represent this initial voice, although he is often writing about events that have occurred in the past. His use of the present tense make his fieldnotes sound self-conscious and heavily reflective. I use the past tense to present this initial voice as my accounts were written after the event (generally the following day). My use of this voice is mainly descriptive.

<sup>6</sup> I should note, however, that I did not write my account of this event (or any other fieldnote for that matter) with this tripartite scheme in mind. The first two voices were certainly present in my writing 'while in the field', but I made no distinction between them at that time (i.e. the typeface I used was the same). While the process of distinguishing between these two voices was done while 'out of the field', I trust that the comments and questions presented in this second voice are clearly distinguishable from the first.

<sup>7</sup> This also helps to distinguish between my and Nazrul's accounts. Any alterations made to Nazrul's account are clearly indicated by the use of standard editorial conventions.

### *Section 1: Towards Horipur (6:30-7:45pm)*

It was about 6:30pm by the time we left the house. It was getting dark, but the neon lights of the main-road shop-fronts mingled with the small fires and hurricane lamps of the street-sellers to illuminate a scene of bustling, nocturnal activity. The road took us north, out of town and towards the Bangladesh-India border.

**DK:** *Nazrul, Mujib, Ang and I left the house just after 6:30pm last night. Mujib had gone out earlier to find a ['baby'] taxi to hire for the night. Even though I knew there would be food provided courtesy of my contribution, I didn't expect we'd be eating until late... I got Mujib to bring some kebabs and ruti [similar to chapatti, flat thin cakes of unleavened bread] from the bazar [market] at 5:30pm so we could have something to keep us going until then.*

*...we took the Tamabil Road out towards the recital location, this time Horipur. Mujib said that it would only take 30 minutes from the house, but after we arrived at Horipur Bazar we got held up there for another 30 minutes or so waiting to meet up with one of the organisers (Kasim Ali) and [to] pick up the host, Asaddor Ali (a pīr [saint] and khadim [attendant] of a nearby majar [grave/shrine]). His baṛi [home] wasn't far from the bazar but we needed him to give us directions. ...*

*It was probably 7:40pm by the time Asaddor Ali arrived with Kasim Ali and bag loads of food. ...we headed off to Asaddor Ali's baṛi... [making] several U-turns in the road before finding the road that led to Asaddor Ali's baṛi. It was only a short journey from the main road down a bumpy mud path.*

**NI:** I was looking forward to going to *Horipur* again—after the last session we had, I thought the place had something special for our search into [the] *puthi* [tradition]—as it comes closest to the spirit of [the] *puthi* reading tradition [that we have seen] and one which is still vibrant to an extent.

Again [it] was...night time when we travelled—so we could not see much [of] the countryside... We stopped...at the market to pick up a man who will take us to the destination—after a while he came and joined...us... In the car he introduced himself as Mr. Assader [Asaddor] Ali... Later on I discovered that he was a Peer [pīr] of the local *mazzar* [majar] of Shah Ahmed Ali.

I heard about this event just a few days before it took place. Having attended an event in a similar location less than a week before (March 2)—as well as attending my first event a week before that (February 21)—I was excited that after six weeks of being on the field I was finally getting to see some *puthi-pora*. Admittedly, I was proactive in arranging the first event, but the second had been arranged by one of the locals. As far as I was aware, this event was also being arranged in 'normal' circumstances (i.e. by locals for locals); that was until Mujib informed me that one of the men involved in organising the event had requested that I pay for it! The following day, Mujib said that the event would take place whether I went or not (which I was pleased to hear); if I did not go, however, he said that only 10-15 people would attend and the host would cover the cost. If I did go though, so would many others, he explained, because they

would want to see the *sada manuṣ* (white person) and get themselves recorded on the video,<sup>8</sup> and, therefore, I would have to split the *khoroḥ* (the expenses) with the host (which I was *not* so pleased to hear). It was not that I minded contributing to the event financially, but I did start to wonder whether the recent flurry of activity was not that I had discovered a thriving community for *puthi-pora* so much, but that the community had discovered a new source of patronage and novelty! I will probably never know, but this situation nevertheless highlights a number of important categories that relate to the arrangements and organisation of a *puthi-pora* event.

Both Nazrul and I note that it was night-time—‘just after 6:30pm’—when we left the flat in Sylhet. We were heading towards the village of Horipur, as we both recorded, on the Tamabil road that runs north from Sylhet Town to the Bangladesh-India border. The previous two events had also led us in this direction, taking place within a radius of no more than 5 kilometres from our destination, Asaddor Ali’s *bari* (home). It was 7:40pm by the time we left Horipur *bajar* with *Pir* Ali (our host for the evening), Kasim Ali (one of the organisers, or Mujib’s contact for the event), and ‘bag loads of food’. I knew that food would be provided as I had made a contribution towards the *khoroḥ*, deciding that if more people were going to attend on my account (whether I liked it or not), it did not seem right that the host should have to bear this extra expense on his own.

These details may seem trivial, but they are important instances of categories that constitute the context in which performances take place. For instance, when does *puthi-pora* usually occur? Is there a specific time of year or *season*, or a specific *time* of day or night? These are significant components in an event schema; as is *location*. *Where* do performances usually take place? The roles and activities of the individuals involved in the *organisation* and *hosting* of performances, along with all other aspects of *performance arrangements*, constitute a subschema in the overall *puthi-pora* event. The fact that *food* was bought as well, indicates at least one component of *khoroḥ* for which *patronage* is required.

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<sup>8</sup> News had presumably spread that I was video-taping these events and had promised to give copies of the recordings to the participants (which I did).

## Section 2: Arrival and Preliminaries (7:45-8:25pm)

We arrived at our destination, Asaddor Ali's *bari*, at about 7:45pm, and were ushered into the room where the performance was to take place. As I began to take stock of our surroundings and started to set up the recording equipment, Angela was taken into the kitchen while Nazrul engaged *Pīr* Ali in conversation.

**DK:** *Asaddor Ali's bari was the largest and most modern bari we've seen for a puthi-poṛa recital so far. The bari had concrete walls and a corrugated iron roof. It also had electricity. The room that we were first ushered into was the same room that the recital took place in. It was a small square room that opened out onto the courtyard area via a porch. It had two other doors inside, one joining up to the kitchen (which looked long and rectangular, probably adjoining other rooms) and another door adjoining another room. There wasn't that much floor space in the room; there were two beds and a [table] taking up a lot of the space. A couple of mats were already laid out from the main door across to the kitchen door. We chatted for a bit before setting up the equipment and waiting for the boyatis<sup>9</sup> to arrive. Ang got invited through to the kitchen and chatted with the women and children while we were setting things up.*

**NI:** Peer Ali took us [to] his house which is typical of the area but with electricity. ... [He] was insisting that we...make ourselves comfortable by taking our shoes off and sitting on the bed... It took a lot of persuasion on our part to make him happy by stating we were happy just sitting on the edge of the bed.

I started to talk to *Peer saab* [*sab*] about himself and his family. ... I asked him about the practice of *puthi* [-*poṛa*] and of singing, he said that he often has *puthi* readings at his home but not singing. When I asked him why not singing, he explained by saying that nearby there is a *madrasha* [*madrassa*] and the head of the *madrasha* lives very close by and...[out of] respect to the [Principal's] objection, they don't practice singing. The peer did say that they have singing sessions at the nearby *mazzar* and at someone's *bari* [*bari*] in *Boteshor*.

It is interesting, in comparing the two accounts, to see what Nazrul and I documented of our experience prior to the beginning of the performance. I was predominantly pre-occupied with describing the setting—the construction of *Pīr* Ali's *bari*, its rooms and amenities. I only mention in passing (almost as an afterthought) that there was any dialogue. It is the setting, in contrast, that Nazrul only refers to in passing. He focuses instead on the hospitality of our host and summarises their conversation. This is due, in part, to our relative levels of language ability—Nazrul, a mother-tongue speaker of

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<sup>9</sup> I used the term '*boyati*' interchangeably with '*puthi*-reader' and '*performer*' in my fieldnotes. This is the appellation Goswami gives the *puthi*-reader in his definitions of *puthi-poṛa* (see chapter 1). *Boyati*, however, meaning 'couplet maker' (from the Arabic *boyet*, 'couplet'), is a title used of *jarīgan* singers. Dunham would probably argue that this designation does not accurately describe the *puthi*-reader who, unlike the *jarīgan* performer, does not create verse in the process of performance. The *puthi*-readers I interviewed did not seem to use this title either. They seemed content to be known by their birth name, or, if pushed, to say that they were simply '*puthi-poṛar manus*' ('*puthi*-reading people').

Sylheti, and I, competent at a basic level only—and, in part, because I knew that I could ask Nazrul later about any significant features of his conversation (which is one of the reasons why I hired a research assistant). It also reveals differences in our approaches to the research. I was there to ‘do a job’ and was, therefore, focused on observing the event. Nazrul understood the significance of relationship in Sylheti culture and participated in the relationships surrounding the event.

Our different perspectives, however, both reveal categories that are relevant to the overall schema. My account highlights the category of *setting*, which is significant in understanding the context in which *puthi-poṛa* events occur. Nazrul’s, on the other hand, in recording his conversation with *Pīr* Ali, highlights a key conceptual category that gets to the heart of how *puthi-poṛa* is both perceived and defined—the distinction made between ‘*puthi* readings’ and ‘singing’.

### *Section 3: Assessing Places and Spaces (7:45-8:25pm)*

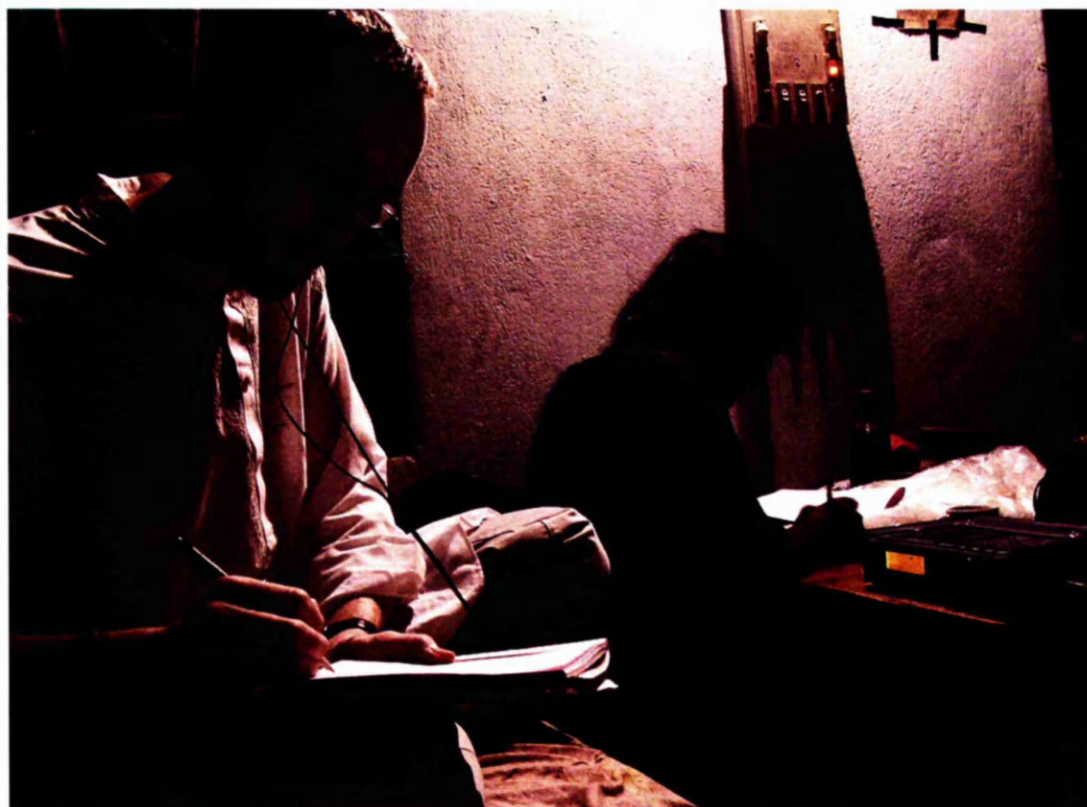
While Nazrul continued to note his pre-performance conversations, I began to place Nazrul, Angela, Mujib, and me, more firmly into the text, particularly in relation to our roles and respective positions in the room. Mujib was the only true participant, the rest of us were engaged in documentation: Nazrul, in observation and writing; Angela, in video-recording and photography; and I, in observation, writing, audio-recording, and taking the occasional photograph (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

**DK:** *Nazrul sat on a chair in front of the large bed so that he could use the table to write on. I sat next to him on the bed using the table to put the DAT machine on. It was a good height and was close to where I wanted the microphones to be set up, in the middle of the room and on the mud floor. Ang set the video camera up between the two beds. It wasn’t an ideal spot because she couldn’t film much of the audience, but it was the only place possible to set up the tripod. ... Mujib was much more fluid; he became a part of the audience.*

I DON’T THINK THE PLACEMENT OF THE MICROPHONES HAD TOO MUCH OF AN EFFECT ON THE SPACE THIS TIME [as I felt it had on the previous two occasions] (ALTHOUGH I GUESS IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO SAY WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED TO THE SPACE HAD I NOT PLACED THE MICROPHONES THERE!). *The two mats across the length of the room was the performing and main audience space. ... The other main audience space was the second, unpadded, bed which was positioned length-ways against and parallel to the back wall. At one point a smaller mat was brought out in front of that bed and [placed] perpendicular to the other mats. The bed that I was sitting on (WHICH BASICALLY BECAME THE OBSERVATION CENTRE) was positioned against and parallel to the right-hand wall as you come in the main entrance. There was still an “us” and “them” dimension [which I had also felt at previous events]—nobody came and sat on the bed with us (ALTHOUGH WITH ALL OF OUR STUFF ON*



*Figure 2.1: Nazrul and I noting observations during the March 9 event. Photograph by Angela Kane.*



*Figure 2.2: Angela video-recording during the March 9 event. Photograph by David Kane.*



THE BED THERE MAY NOT HAVE BEEN ROOM ANYWAY)—with “us” taking the (literal) higher ground and looking down on the performance.

Having the only light in the room above the bed didn't help to make us any less conspicuous. We were well illuminated but the boyatis needed a small oil lamp to help them read the *puthi*s. Apart from the stares of a few... people seemed to be a bit less concerned about our presence this time. I RECOGNISED SOME OF THE PEOPLE FROM PREVIOUS RECITALS... THEY MAY BE STARTING TO GET USED TO THE IDEA OF US COMING...

NI: I was speaking to the people who had gathered so far and put the question to them: “Why [do] some peer object to listening/playing music?” ...I did not get any full answer; all they were saying [was]... “Some object while others don't.”

During this conversation, I noticed someone come in with a big sized *puthi*. ... The man who brought...the *puthi* is called Mr. Siraz [Siraj] Uddin [from]...Horipur. When I asked him where...he [got] his *puthi*, he said that it belonged to his grandfather... When I asked him who...the author [is], he said he will find out and started to look [it] up in the *puthi*, as it will mention his name amongst the lines. After a quick look he told me that the author is Syed Hamza [Soiyod Hamja] (I guess we will need to check this...for verification). ...

When I asked the crowd how long the reading goes—Mr. Uddin said it could go on all night [or] sometimes for [a] few hours.

Because we arrived early I was able to determine exactly where in the room the *puthi*-readers were going to sit. I set up the equipment and placed us accordingly—that is, in what I perceived to be the prime viewing location. The category of interest here is *space*: the *spaces* that were created and occupied by the *performers* and *audience*, and the *spaces* we created (and therefore affected) by our presence and the presence of our equipment (particularly the microphones).

Reference to ‘the only light in the room’ was made in the context of my self-conscious awareness of the incongruity of our being made *more* visible by this light, when the *puthi*-readers needed an additional light source to help them read the *puthi*s. This additional light source, *lem*, a kind of oil lamp was to Nazrul an enduring symbol of the tradition (as he shared with me later); so much so that during the performance he passed a note to Angela via me asking her to take a ‘lamp and *puthi*’ photograph.<sup>10</sup> It is not that these *lems* are used for *puthi-pora* especially—they are a ubiquitous light source in rural Bangladesh. But this is precisely why they are so iconic: because they conjurer up pictorial images of rural village life. Just as *lems* have these connotations, so *puthi-pora* is associated in many peoples’ minds with a rural idyll. As a physical object, *lem* is also a category that is relevant to the schema. By illuminating the *puthi*, it has a practical (rather than ritual) purpose, which is demonstrated by the way it is

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<sup>10</sup> RTO, DAT013: 1.37.00. This photograph is shown on the title page.

passed from reader to reader in turn. Other *physical objects*, such as *tables*, *chairs*, *beds*, and *mats*, are instances of categories which can affect, or even create, the kinds of *spaces* mentioned above.

Although Nazrul got little response to his question about certain objections to the listening or playing of music, his account does raise other issues of import. Two of these relate to Nazrul's conversation with recent arrival Siraj Uddin and the large-size *puthi* in his possession: *puthi-ownership* and *puthi-authorship*. By *puthi-ownership* I do not mean the current owner of the *puthi* only (in this case, Siraj Uddin), it can also include the succession of owners a *puthi* may have had in its lifetime (in this case, at least Siraj Uddin's grandfather). This not only tells us something about the history of a particular *puthi* (as a performance object), but also something of how the tradition is transmitted from generation to generation. *Puthi-authorship* is self-explanatory. The situation exposed by Nazrul's account is Siraj Uddin's ignorance of the *puthi*-author. This may not seem to warrant much thought, but it does indicate, at very least, that the person who wrote the *puthi* is not important to Siraj Uddin. As we shall see in chapter 4, this is an important measure in determining individuals' relationships to their (now deceased) *authors*, and of distinguishing between different *puthi-types*.

One issue raised by Nazrul's account that is directly related to the performance event is his question regarding performance *length*. What expectations do performers and audiences have when they attend a *puthi-pora* event, of how long or how late they will stay? The response to Nazrul's question is twofold: 'it could go on all night [or]...for [a] few hours.' But what are the factors that will lead to one or the other?

#### *Section 4: Reader 1, Puthi 1 (8:25-9:30pm)*

The performance begins at 8.25pm with the first reader of the night, Siraj Uddin. The setting is intimate; the atmosphere calm and relaxed. As I noted elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> 'People seemed to have come to listen to the *puthis* (rather than look at us...), particularly at the beginning.'

**DK:** *The programme kicked off around 8:25pm. There were about 21 people present at the start, a mixture of ages and both men and women present. The women were listening to the recital through the kitchen doors while they were preparing dinner.*

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<sup>11</sup> This was noted under the heading 'General Observations' of the same performance in the recording information I submitted to The British Library Sound Archive along with my original DAT and Mini DV tapes (collection reference C1092).

Figure 2.3: Siraj Uddin (left) explaining a section of the puthi. Photograph by Angela Kane.



...Siraj Uddin started by reading from a very large Bengali puthi [called] "Amir Hamja". I was assured that the people with the Sylheti-Nagri puthis would be coming later. ...I soon became intrigued and captivated by the way that Siraj Uddin was reading. He's the only guy that I've seen so far at a puthi recital explaining continuously during the course of his reading. He [is] a local guy and it sounds as if he meets with the people there regularly to read puthis. WHEN WE ASKED HIM [after the performance] IF WE COULD TAKE HIS PUTHI TO PHOTOGRAPH IT [which we tried to do with all the puthis we recorded] HE WAS QUITE INSISTENT THAT HE NEEDED IT BACK AGAIN FOR ANOTHER PROGRAMME ON SATURDAY NIGHT. THAT WAS REAFFIRMED BY OUR HOST, ASADDOR ALI, AS WE WERE LEAVING. [I took this as confirmation (in part) that claims for frequent puthi-pora recitals were not made simply to please me.]

IS [explanation of the puthi text] JUST HIS [Siraj Uddin's] STYLE OR IS THAT A "NORMAL" STYLE? WAS IT BECAUSE THE CONTENT OF THE PUTHI LENT ITSELF TO EXPLANATION? IF I'M HONEST, I GUESS I WAS DISAPPOINTED THAT HE WAS READING BENGALI AND NOT SYLHETI-NAGRI. [But why was I disappointed? Because I had predetermined that the performance of Sylheti-Nagri puthis was to be my focus?] I'M BEGINNING TO WONDER THOUGH WHETHER THE [script] MAKES ANY DIFFERENCE TO THE TRADITION... IT MAY MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE READER, ALTHOUGH IT MAY JUST SIMPLY BE A MATTER OF WHAT SCRIPT THEY CAN READ... WHEN THE QUESTION WAS ADDRESSED TO THE AUDIENCE..., THE RESPONSE WAS THAT THE SCRIPT DIDN'T MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE TO THEM.

**NI:** Mr. Siraz Uddin started to read Amir Hamza [Hamja] from p.139. At the start of the reading we had an audience of about 14 people including ourselves and the few ladies walking about [in the] nearby kitchen. I could also [see] some people

standing by the door outside. Mr. Uddin was reading OK, not brilliant and not bad either—just in between. He did...a good running commentary as he was reading. So far this has been [an] exceptional case for a man reader to go on explaining as he [is] reading. ...the...elderly lady reader in *Kanishail*...is the model I [have in mind] ...when thinking of the 'typical' *puthi* reader...

*Peer Saab* asked the ladies in the kitchen to grab a mat so they can sit down and listen. One girl [got] a mat and few of them sat there for a while. Because the cooking was being done in that room—the [seating] arrangement for the ladies were not sustained for long.

And on to the reading of *puthi*; one man sitting next to Mr. Uddin was asking about a character and he replied. I could not hear them properly to make a note of the character being discussed. But nonetheless [I] feel this to be part of the 'educational' benefit of the whole exercise [of] reading/listening [to] *puthis*.

...Mr. Uddin is explaining part of the *puthi* to the audience...about marriage. ... Mr. Uddin is explaining the story in detail and the audience are well pleased—both with the story and [with] the explanation they are getting. The way Mr. Uddin is doing the textual analysis of the *puthi* shows...his knowledge of the story.

*Peer saab* now and then asks the people standing outside to come inside but not all rush in inside—instead [they] are hanging around outside but staying close enough to hear the *puthi*. ...

In one of the...line[s], there is a mention of [a] number (either 5 or 50 thousand) and...one of the [members of the] audience was asking Mr. Uddin how come this amount? ... I thought it was very noble of him to question the story (at least for his own clarification) as opposed to the normal, passive listening that we encounter in [the] majority of the readings.

Mr. Uddin at one point found it difficult to see because of the poor light—so got hold of a lamp (or *lem* as I used to know/call them). In between the readings, Mr. Uddin makes jokes—as a way of his explanation of the story—mostly in mocking style. People seem to like this as an addition to his actual readings of the *puthi*. At one stage he said in Sylheti "*Beeaar haus morse ni*" [which] loosely means 'has... the desire for marriage...ended?' The word *haus* (desire) [is] used in a bad way and this is quite interesting in the context of the reader and the audience. Clearly this comment [reveals]...his own strongly held views about the characters in the story and what they [are] getting up to. I heard one guy complaining very bitterly about one of the characters and then asking apologetically to Mr. Uddin whether he is [also] upset [by] it? *Bejaar ni*?

We get the first round of *paan/supaari* [*pan*, betel-leaf; *supari*, betel-nut]. *Peer saab* at this point [was] saying that the people who will bring [the Sylheti-] Nagri [*puthis*] will read [them] but for the mean time Mr. Uddin should read the Bangla [Bengali] [*puthi*]. ...

A man...arrives and walks straight [up] to Dave...saying something like 'hello my brother' [which] I thought [was] very interesting. The same person tried to utter one [or] two English words throughout the performance. ... After a while I noticed [that] he [was] pointing his hand at me or Dave and saying things to [someone else]. Don't know what [this] was all...about. I guess it's got to do with the fact that we were 'outsiders' being researchers; we were actively different from them and it's pretty noticeable.

At one stage [in] the reading I heard many complaints being made against the 'evil ones' in the story. I could pick [out] the word '*haramzada*' ['bastard'] being read from the *puthi*. I guess this is the first time I came across the use of such word in [a] *puthi*—I hope to look this up and the context [in which] it's being used. ...

*Peer Saab* appears from the kitchen...to see how things are going—looking from the kitchen to see the performance as well as the foods...being prepared. I



notice a little girl peeping through the kitchen door in amusement. Is it the readings or the amount of people at her house [that] is the object of her curiosity?

I heard one man say “*eela shuzaa noy*” (‘it’s not easy like this’). Again [I] do not know the context [in which] he was saying this. I would like to see the page and then see what they [had] found... At this point a middle-aged man on my left shouted “*buzoni kuno baal*” (‘Do you understand any kind of pubic hair?’). The use of this word (*baal*) has more serious connotation in Sylheti/Bangla than... it [has] in [an] English translation. [It was] another [case] of the foul language being used tonight. He said that when someone suggested Mr. Latif [Lotif]...read one [*puthi*] instead. This...showed marked feelings amongst the audience of their preference for the type of *puthi* they wanted to hear and the performer of their liking. ...

I am kind of following the story line in the *puthi* but can only sustain it for few minutes as I am turned to observ[ing]...the event... [A]lso the *puthi* is not being read from beginning to end. I am aware and hopeful that I will be able to follow the story in my own time...

Nazrul’s and my accounts raise questions relating to the number and composition of the audience (although they differ in recording the specific number of people who had gathered up to this point): How many people attend *puthi-pora* events? Who, or what kind of people, attend (men, women, young people, old people)? These categories—*age*, *gender*, and *number*—relate to both *audience* and *performer*.

In regard to *audience gender*, it is interesting to note the relative visibility (or invisibility) of the women. Nazrul and I both mention the presence of the women of the *bari* at the beginning of the performance. They generally remained in the kitchen. Nazrul continues to record the activity surrounding the kitchen doors in his account. Although they demarcated a spatial boundary, the doors did not prevent the women in the kitchen being able to hear and see what was going on. Indeed, in order to keep an eye on proceedings, *Pir* Ali hovered between these *public* and *private spaces*.<sup>12</sup>

As far as the performance itself is concerned, Nazrul and I both picked up on a feature of Siraj Uddin’s reading which surprised us—his explanation. It was not the explanation as such that surprised us, but that the person giving the explanation was a man. Why? At the previous two events I attended, apart from the occasional comment interjected in the course of the reading, most of the male *puthi*-readers read with little or no explanation. In contrast, and on other less-formal occasions, we had been able to

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<sup>12</sup> While the public-private binarism has its obvious problems (for a good summary of the recent debate surrounding the use of public-private, see the introduction in Lal, Ruby. *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.), I have nevertheless chosen to use ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the absence of other terms more specifically appropriate for describing the general spatial distinction that existed in the *puthi-pora* events I observed. It should be noted, however, that the ‘public’ spaces were not truly public (inasmuch as they took place in someone’s home and not in a community space); neither were the ‘private’ spaces truly ‘private’ (for Angela was often invited to go into these spaces even though I was not).

observe *puthi-pora* by female readers and noted with interest how these women often paused their reading to explain the text. One such lady Nazrul refers to in his account, the elderly lady we visited in Kanishail, Nurunnessa Begum, whom he describes as his model of a typical *puthi*-reader. Whether it is the explanation that leads Nazrul to reveal his own prototypical<sup>13</sup> understanding of what a *puthi*-reader does in the process of performance, or whether a typical *puthi*-reader in his mind is female (and possibly both), we are introduced to two important categories: the typicality (or otherwise) of *explanation* in *puthi-pora*, and the *gender* of the *puthi*-reader.

One of the more obvious contrasts between my and Nazrul's documentation of Siraj Uddin's performance, is that while I was limited to recording the bare fact of his *explanation* (because of my limited language acquisition), because Nazrul was able to understand what was said, he was able to document some of its content and assess it. He also records the interaction of the audience—that various members of the audience ask questions: in one instance regarding one of the characters, in another, debating the accuracy of a numerical figure. He supposes that the interaction between performers and audience—questioning and explanation—is a 'part of the "educational" benefit of ...reading/listening [to] *puthis*', which highlights the issue of *function*.

This interaction, or *audience involvement* (as it could be categorised), was also expressed through an *identification* (comparing and contrasting of experiences), with the characters in the *puthi* (seen in the 'many complaints being made against the "evil ones" in the story' and also in comments such as 'it's not easy like this'). Though not recorded in the account above, *audience involvement* was also manifested when members of the audience joined Siraj Uddin in 'reading' the end of the rhymed poetic lines. Whether this was an instinctive response, or whether it was encouraged by Siraj Uddin, it, regardless, raises the question: Are there appropriate times for this kind of audience participation (generated, perhaps, by the *puthi*-narrative and/or prompted by the reader) or can the audience respond by joining in with whichever lines, whenever they want to? What expectations of *audience involvement* do performer and audience bring with them to the event? Nazrul's comments, in relation to the audience member who questions one of the events in the story, indicates that how an audience responds

<sup>13</sup> D'Andrade (1995:124) distinguishes between schemas and prototypes as follows: '...a schema is an organized framework of objects and relations which has yet to be filled in with concrete detail, while a prototype consists of a specified set of expectations. The filling in of the slots of a schema with an individual's standard default values creates a *prototype*. A prototype is a highly typical *instantiation* (i.e., an instance of a) schema...'

to a *puthi*-reader leads either to a *positive* or a *negative involvement*, in which *asking questions* is positive and *passivity* is not.

One audience member's response to the suggestion of a new *puthi*-reader was to swear at the top of his voice. From Nazrul's interpretation of the incident, we might infer that this man attended the event expecting to hear local reader, Siraj Uddin, read from a familiar *puthi*, *Amir Hamja*. Because we attended, though, so did Abdul Lotif (a dominant performer in the previous two events), bringing his Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* with him. With more than one performer (and two that could read Sylheti-Nagri) was there pressure on the host (or whomever was deciding which *puthi* should be read and by whom) to give each performer an opportunity to read? Was there also pressure to appease my stated desire 'to record only those *puthis*...written in the Sylheti-Nagri script'? I had already predetermined that the *puthis* of the Sylheti-Nagri tradition were to be my focus and so I was disappointed that Siraj Uddin was reading from a Bengali *puthi* and not a Sylheti-Nagri one. Had we not attended this event, would Abdul Lotif have attended? Would Siraj Uddin have read from *Amir Hamja* all night?

One further category that should not be overlooked is *performance frequency*. How often does *puthi-pora* take place (daily, weekly, monthly)? This could be linked with the time of year (or *seasons*), but it could also depend on other, perhaps more individual, circumstances. This issue was raised when I asked Siraj Uddin whether I could borrow his *puthi* after the event to photograph the pages he had read from. He was insistent, however, that he needed it back for another event that would take place the following Saturday, just three days later.

### *Section 5: Reader 2, Puthi 2, Tea Break (9:30-10:20pm)*

It is 9:30pm. We stop to change the mini DV tape; Siraj Uddin has read for an hour. A new reader, Abdul Korim, enters the fray. He begins to read from *Mohobbot Nama*, a Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*, but his style of reading contrasts greatly from that of Siraj Uddin and generates a stark audience reaction.

**DK:** *After an hour a new boyati, Abdul Korim, an older man with a less polished voice who had arrived during Siraj Uddin's recital, began to read from "Yusuf-Julikha [Mohobbot Nama]" in Sylheti-Nagri (A DECISION MADE BY THEM OR BECAUSE OF THEIR PERCEPTION THAT WE WANTED A NEW BOYATI AFTER [every] HOUR (IN LINE WITH THE FIRST PROGRAMME) OR BECAUSE NAZRUL SUGGESTED IT?).*



Figure 2.4: Abdul Korim (centre) reading from Mohobbot Nama. Photograph by David Kane.



*I asked [Abdul Korim] to move and sit where Siraj Uddin [had been] sitting so that he was in full view of the video camera. He seemed a little reluctant at first, but others in the audience told him to move as well, so he moved. I'VE NOTICED THAT WHENEVER A NEW BOYATI STARTS TO READ FROM A NEW PUTHI THE ATMOSPHERE CHANGES FROM THE AUDIENCE BEING INVOLVED TO THEM BEING DISTRACTED. IS IT NORMAL TO HAVE MORE THAN ONE BOYATI AT A RECITAL ANYWAY (OTHER THAN A SUPPORTING BOYATI) OR HAVE OUR HOSTS JUST ARRANGED FOR THERE TO BE MORE BOYATIS PRESENT TO PLEASE US? I GUESS [it's] NATURAL. IF THE STORY AND THE STORY-TELLER CHANGES (ABRUPTLY?), IT'S BOUND TO HAVE AN AFFECT ON PEOPLES' CONCENTRATION. ([They] WANT TO STRETCH, SHUFFLE, GET UP, CHAT A LITTLE, LIGHT A CIGARETTE, ETC.) UNLESS THEY WANT A CHANGE, IT'S QUITE REASONABLE THAT IT'LL TAKE TIME TO GET INTO A NEW STORY. [Even if they do want a change, it can still take time to get into a new story.] THAT DOES SEEM TO BE A PATTERN THAT I'VE OBSERVED OVER THE LAST COUPLE OF PUTHI RECITALS. IT PROBABLY WASN'T HELPED BY THE WAY ABDUL KORIM WAS READING.*

*[Abdul Korim] was far less interactive than Siraj Uddin and apart from a few subtle hand gestures, barely raised his head or uttered a single word of explanation. His reading style (pausing at the end of each line) may have been for effect, or just the way he reads. I WONDER WHETHER HE FELT SELF-CONSCIOUS, LIKE HE WAS ON SHOW. He complained that he didn't have a good voice on a couple of occasions. IT WAS HARD TO KNOW WHETHER IT WAS BECAUSE HE HAD A BAD THROAT OR BECAUSE HE KNEW THAT ABDUL LOTIF (WHO ARRIVED WITH MONU MIAH [Abdul Lotif's performance companion] DURING HIS RECITATION) COULD READ BETTER THAN HIM AND FELT INTIMIDATED.*

*We stopped for a short tea break at 9:40pm, only 10 minutes into Abdul Korim's reading, and then started again 10 minutes later.*

NI: Another reader greets us by the name of Mr. Abdul Karim [Korim] of Baali Para [Balipara], Horipur. ...

*Peer saab* is asking Mr. Karim to read and the audience goes quiet. Heard a voice say “*aaibo aaibo gola*” (meaning ‘the tunes will come to the voice’ but the literal translation [is] ‘neck will come’). One man remarks that Mr. Karim is falling behind his readings—due to [a] lack of practice.

At this moment [the] room gets smoky due to recently lit-up cigarettes. I noticed Mr. Karim [trying] to read few lines from his memory. Tea and *muri* [*muṛi*, puffed-rice] are being served to the audience. ... they have provided us with toast and tea.

I was throwing [out] the question of whether reading in Bangla or Nagri makes any difference. I could [hear replies] coming in from all corners but was struck by the [reply] given by the gentleman who came to greet Dave in English. He said that no matter what language [is] being read—what he...hears is Sylheti. ... When I asked Mr. Karim...[which he] preferred [out] of Nagri and Bangla, he replied...that he preferred Nagri as it comes closest to sounding Sylheti... I too feel that...

Entered Mr. Latif—face/voice remembered from the previous readings. At the time of his arrival, Mr. Karim was reading. Abdul Latif took a closer look at the big Bangla *puthi* on the floor nearby. *Peer saab* is trying to get tea to all. The audience are beginning to complain that Mr. Karim’s reading is not good. ...

I heard a guy shout from the other side of the room that someone else should take over the readings—clearly not satisfied with the reader. *Peer saab* is asking Mr. Latif to read but I told him that we have heard his reading [before] and that Mr. Karim should read for the time being. Someone shouts for *paan*. More people are standing outside as there is no room inside. Mr. Karim is saying that he hasn’t got the neck [voice] (“*gola naai*”) while another man from the audience said “*Hayre hay! Aajke ki hoylo?*”—[Alas!] What has happened tonight?

People again start to talk amongst themselves—clearly a sign of [the] audience losing interest in the reader or [in] the *puthi* being read. Mr. Karim remarked later on that after all I am getting the tunes but I didn’t think so.

I heard Mr. Siraj Uddin say “*Halaar Goru*” [a mild swear word which literally translated is ‘brother-in-law’s cow’ but, directed towards an individual, implies that they are unintelligent and worthless] but didn’t get the context [in which] he was saying it. Then at one point he was saying, “If you can recite by not seeing [without looking] then why do you do [it]?” (*aana dekhia paao* [paro?] *thaile etha koro jeno* [keno?]?) Another man mocked the reader by saying “battery down” meaning ‘out of tune’. Things are getting out of hand as more and more people are talking to each other—a clear sign of the readings not being appreciated. Mr. Latif on the other hand [is] looking anxiously to join in to read. Mr. Karim... [is] commenting [very little] on the *puthi*.

Another *puthi* has arrived. ... *Peer Saab* is busy trying to organize...[seating] for the rest of the audience. I notice Mujib is happy chatting to a man next to him. One man came to Mr. Latif to read. It got heated at one point as to who should read [next] and what. The general scene here [is] not ‘happy’, for the time being at least.

Here again we see the value of Nazrul’s account. While I note impressions, he records comments. I was able to sense frustration on behalf of the audience, and could see that Abdul Korim’s slow and non-interactive reading did not help, but at the same time I did not want my own aesthetic judgement to be the determining factor in interpreting these events. I also supposed that the audience’s change from involvement (in Siraj Uddin’s reading) to distraction (with Abdul Korim’s) was part of a more general (and

natural) effect brought about by a change of 'story' and 'story-teller'. It is clear, however, that an *aesthetic judgement* was applied by members of the audience, and by Abdul Korim himself. I could understand enough to hear him say, on a few occasions, that his voice (*gola*) was 'not good'. I was unsure whether that meant that he actually had a bad (or sore) throat or whether he was being somewhat self-effacing in front of the other performers (particularly in front of Abdul Lotif, another—and a much more confident—Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*-reader). I will probably never know, but this situation tells us, at very least, that both performer and audience have a discriminatory sense of the aesthetic which is applied in *puthi-pora*. *How puthis* are read matters.

As Abdul Korim's reading was clearly not appreciated, we might ask why he was allowed to read in the first place. It was after Siraj Uddin had been reading for an hour that Abdul Korim began. My account questions whether the decision to change reader at this point was the unhindered decision of the event organisers (as my understanding was that this was *their* event), or whether it was due to their perception that I wanted to hear a different reader every hour. As this had been my intention at the first *puthi-pora* event I attended, I wondered whether this time-scheduling had been conveyed to the organisers of this event as well. Or, was this typical of the way in which events are usually organised? Who makes these decisions and when? How are they implemented in the process of performance?

One category in the event sequence that may not seem particularly significant in the overall schema, is something that both Nazrul and I note in our accounts—the *tea-break*. Nazrul's documentation here is most chronological. Abdul Korim had only read for 10 minutes before having to stop (most of the audience reaction against him came in the 30 minutes of reading after the break). The tea and *muri* served to *puthi*-readers and audience, the 'toast' (small biscuits in the shape of toast) and tea served to us, and the *pan/supari* that was available throughout, were all tangible components of the *khoro*c (expenses) mentioned earlier. The fact that we were served 'toast' rather than *muri*, perhaps explains, in part, the request for us to pay for this event, as in this material expression of hospitality our presence had added to the cost.

During this tea-break Nazrul asks the audience, and Abdul Korim, whether the *script* of the *puthi*, and, by extension, the *language* of the *puthi* (Bengali or Sylheti), makes any difference to their experience of its reading. This was a question I asked Nazrul to pose. As I recorded in my disappointment above (that Siraj Uddin, expositor

*par excellence*, read from a Bengali, rather than a Sylheti-Nagri, *puthi*), I was led to ask a whole range of questions regarding the difference the script makes (if any) to an understanding of the tradition as a whole. Nazrul notes the response of one man who said that the language of the *puthi* makes no difference to him at all; he hears Sylheti regardless of what is read. Abdul Korim on the other hand (a man who can read both), said that he prefers the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* because they (unsurprisingly) sound the most Sylheti. Abdul Korim's answer makes sense. The other man's response made me wonder whether some Bengali script *puthis* are in fact written in the Sylheti language but are transliterated in the Bengali script. Could the experience of hearing Sylheti, no matter what is read, be due to the performers actually changing the text as they read to make it sound Sylheti (like an on-the-spot translation), or is it due to the listener being bilingual? Are the performers changing some of the words from Bengali to Sylheti, or are they just pronouncing them with Sylheti pronunciation? Are the two types of *puthi* linguistically distinct?

Abdul Lotif's entrance is documented in both our accounts. To Nazrul his face and voice were instantly recognisable. I wondered if his arrival and presence began to intimidate Abdul Korim. The pressure was mounting on him nevertheless. Criticism was coming from all quarters as other *puthis* were arriving and getting passed around. Nazrul recounts that while 'Things are getting out of hand...Mr. Lotif...[is] looking anxiously to join in to read.' He did not have long to wait.

#### *Section 6: Reader 3, Puthi 2 (10:20-11:30pm)*

The outcome of the heated discussions leads Abdul Korim to pass *Mohobbot Nama* to Abdul Lotif. Audience response to Abdul Lotif's reading is instantaneous; the verdict of one man encapsulating the mood of all—'That does it!' Was this was the same man who lamented during Abdul Korim's reading—'[Alas!] What has happened tonight?'

**DK:** *Abdul Korim continued reading for another half an hour before he passed the puthi [Mohobbot Nama] over to Abdul Lotif. ... The audience responded immediately to Abdul Lotif's reading. The whole room joined in at the end of the lines. IS IT BECAUSE ABDUL LOTIF IS A "BETTER" READER THAN ABDUL KORIM THAT PEOPLE RESPOND TO HIM OR BECAUSE HE HAS A PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUE TO ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE? THE PUTHI WAS THE SAME—I.E. IT WAS THE SAME STORY—SO THE CHANGE IN AUDIENCE RESPONSE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BECAUSE OF A CONTENT CHANGE. ABDUL LOTIF LOOKS UP AND LOOKS AT PEOPLE WHEN HE READS. DOES THAT AUTOMATICALLY ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE OR DOES HE INDICATE TO THE AUDIENCE WHEN HE WANTS THEM TO JOIN IN?*



Figure 2.5: Abdul Lotif (right of centre) reading from Mohobbot Nama. Photograph by Angela Kane.



*At one point I thought I heard Abdul Lotif tell a guy on his right not to “speak” [I’ve noticed that the Sylheti verb to speak, ‘ko-’, is sometimes used in reference to reading and/or singing as well as speaking]. This man was reading/reciting from memory along with Abdul Lotif at certain points, more than other members of the audience. ...*

*I had to interrupt Abdul Lotif’s [reading] to change tapes. ... After the tape change, because we had already heard an hour of reading from “Yusuf-Julikha” [Mohobbot Nama] and as I had seen another puthi floating around, I asked what the puthi was, hoping to record something new (a new Sylheti-Nagri puthi). People seemed to want Abdul Lotif to carry on reading from “Yusuf-Julikha” and so he did. AS IT TURNED OUT, THE OTHER PUTHI WAS ABDUL LOTIF’S PUTHI OF HINDU SONGS [“Rag Horiboñsho” by Din Bhobanondo, a Hindu convert to Islam] SO I WASN’T TOO UPSET (I HAD ALREADY RECORDED A FEW OF THOSE SONGS [at previous events]). Abdul Lotif continued for about an hour.*

**NI:** Mr. Latif started to read Usuf Julekha [Yusuf-Julikha/Mohobbot Nama], p.19. His voice is a familiar one to us, especially after the readings [a week ago at Fotehpur]. The room got quieter and the audience started to enjoy the evening. They also joined in with the end-chorus. One guy shouted “ou oilo” (‘that does it’) clearly a verdict on the performance of Mr. Latif. Most of the people are pleased with Mr Latif’s reading—it gave them a welcome relief from the previous readers [reader?]. More people are joining [in] singing the last lines of [the] *poyar* [poetic metre]. The audience listen...with reserved silence—they seem to have approved [of] his style of reading and the *puthi* itself. I get excited with the rhythm of the *puthi* as I... [try and] guess the [rhyming] words [at] the end of each line, for example ‘*ghele/hoile*’.

The people standing and walking outside the room [were] having an effect on the performance...so they were asked to come inside. Looking at the room...it was not

possible to get the people inside [and] provide [seating]. ... People once again started to talk amongst themselves [and] once again...this...[made] the listening of the *puthi* less enjoyable. I heard talk of another Nagri *puthi*...a song book in Nagri called *Raag Hori Bongsho* [Rag Horiboñsho] by Din Bobanondho [Bhobanondo]. I think this is the first time I came across a book of songs in Nagri so I was very excited—[both] at the news of a song book being found and also, and I guess more important, a performance of it...sometime in the evening.

A line from the *puthi* caught my ear: “*Ai dighe hai dighe chai/she ruptho naa pai*” (‘I look this way [and] that/but [I] don’t see that look’). He [Abdul Lotif] is putting in more of the melody here and there as he is reading and it sounds good—sadly he does not sustain it. Again people are talking amongst themselves, but I cannot make sense of their words. ...

So far Mr. Latif does not explain the *puthi* as a commentary like others have done. It’s very rare (so far in our search) to see people laugh at the content of the *puthis*, but during this performance I notice lots of laughter. I am asking myself at this stage to look [in] the *puthi* to see where and what the humour is all about.

I heard Mr. Latif say, “*Boro hit laaghaa kotha*” (‘words are of extreme pain’). Latif begins to explain a little now, beginning with the observation that these words will bring great sadness—clearly commenting...[on] his version of the story, as he is understanding [it]. ...I feel I need to read the *puthi* to get [a] fuller understanding of the humour as well as...the part which got Mr. Latif to comment [on] the extreme pain.

A *murrobbi* [*murobbi*, elder/superior] came in and was greeted warmly by rest of the audience/readers. *Peer saab* appears from the kitchen and [is] looking to see how things are going. People are engrossed in the story and are doing their running commentary... on the good and bad [characters] of the story. I hear a man say “*eela shujaa noy*” (‘its not that easy’); again, I don’t know if he was commenting on the story or... [whether it was] part of [his] own conversation with fellow listeners.

I saw a rise in the excitement of the people in their listening of the *puthi* and I am moved to look...for myself [to see] what the story is all about. I guess it would be ideal to have a text with me to see [in] parallel as the readings are taking place—but it [would] not be possible all the time, as we too do not know what *puthis* they have beforehand, to prepare ourselves.

The response of the audience to Abdul Lotif’s reading challenges the supposition that a change of reader naturally leads to a period of initial audience distraction. But there are two potential caveats that should be considered here. Firstly, although there was a change of storyteller, there was not a change of story—thus one important thread of continuity was maintained. Secondly, and perhaps more influentially, dissatisfaction with Abdul Korim’s reading may have been enough for the audience to welcome a change of reader regardless of who it was. But, if one takes a more positive view, the audience reaction could have been, quite simply, a response to ‘good’ reading. In their disapproval of Abdul Korim’s reading and approval of Abdul Lotif’s, the audience displayed an aesthetic judgement which is highly schematic—criteria that constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (or ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’) reading.

So, what did Abdul Lotif (observably) do that Abdul Korim did not? In what way(s) did he engage the audience? We noted above, in connection with Siraj Uddin, that *explanation* comes under the meta-category, *performance techniques*. Siraj Uddin most certainly engaged the audience in this way; Abdul Korim most notably did not. Although Abdul Lotif explained a little, Nazrul states that he generally did not. What he did do, however, was look up and look at the audience during his reading, and did so more and more throughout. I noted elsewhere, at one point, that 'He's only using the text as a prompt.'<sup>14</sup> Siraj Uddin also looked up and made *eye contact* as he read, as did Abdul Korim,<sup>15</sup> but neither did so as extensively as Abdul Lotif.

Looking up from the text and making *eye contact* finds an audience response in *joining in* at the end of the rhymed poetic lines, which acts as a significant measure in determining the level of *audience involvement*. Abdul Lotif telling the man to his right to stop reading, again raises the question of whether there are appropriate points during the reading when other people can join in and points when it's not appropriate. This man was looking at the *puthi* over Abdul Lotif's shoulder, joining in with him to read some parts and holding his notes at the end of the lines for longer.<sup>16</sup> Whether or not Abdul Lotif said what I thought he said to this man, I record that this man 'seems a little put out...and stops reading with [Abdul Lotif].'<sup>17</sup> This may suggest, therefore, that readers generally do want to control the level of *audience involvement* (or at least, Abdul Lotif does).

It should also be noted that despite the overall reaction Abdul Korim received, there was at least one occasion in which I recorded 'some concentration...and a little joining in.' This comes immediately after an observation that Abdul Korim 'has a wry smile on his face as he glances up at the end of a line.'<sup>18</sup> Abdul Korim, then, like Siraj Uddin and Abdul Lotif, also employs this *performance technique* and receives some response, but one has to conclude that either he did not use it as effectively (and there is surely evidence to suggest this), or that there were other factors involved. Nazrul's account refers to two specifically musical features which should not be overlooked. In one place he writes: 'I get excited with the rhythm of the *puthi* as I...[try and] guess

<sup>14</sup> RTO, DAT014: 0.08.44. This did lead me to wonder whether Abdul Lotif was actually reading from the *puthi* at all or whether he was, in fact, reciting the text from memory (cf. Dunham 1997:46).

<sup>15</sup> RTO, DAT013: 1.05.00, 1.08.44, 1.37.00.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.44.32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.47.30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.08.44.

the [rhyming] words [at] the end of each line' and later '...[Abdul Lotif] is putting in more of the melody here and there as he is reading and it sounds good—sadly he does not sustain it.' In *rhythm* and *melody* we not only have two conceptual categories but two independent schemas that are a part of wider musical culture.<sup>19</sup>

Before we leave the point, there is another feature which, while not mentioned in either account above, is evident in Figure 3.6: *physical movement*. In contrast to the audience (the majority of whom are in focus and, therefore, relatively static), Abdul Lotif is slightly blurred from the waist up. This is because he was rocking back and forth while he was reading, an indication of his own involvement in the performance. Abdul Korim did not get so physically involved; he 'barely raised his head' during the course of his reading. But he did make a 'few subtle hand gestures' which, while not vigorous, nonetheless constitute an element of *physical movement*. Whether a *puthi*-reader's *physical movement* should be categorised as a *performance technique* (used to engage and involve the audience), or whether it should be categorised, simply, as a measure of *performer involvement*, is harder to decide. It may be both. This category is also a feature of *audience involvement*, one example of which is Kasim Ali 'rocking back and forth' in response to Siraj Uddin's reading.<sup>20</sup> Another example of *physical movement* on the part of the audience is 'nodding' which is sometimes accompanied with vocal *exclamation*.

It would be wrong to leave the impression, however, that Abdul Lotif engaged the audience throughout. Just as there was audience distraction during Abdul Korim's reading, so too, notes Nazrul, was there an element of distraction during Abdul Lotif's reading. This did not lead to complaints or verbal abuse, but it did have the effect of rendering 'the listening of the *puthi* less enjoyable' (for Nazrul at least). What caused the distraction is not said, but it could have been talk of another Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* (Din Bhobanondo's *Rag Horiboñsho*<sup>21</sup>) which I noticed 'floating around'. Nazrul and I were probably more distracted by this *puthi* than the audience were, however; they

<sup>19</sup> *Melody* will be considered in chapter 5.

<sup>20</sup> RTO, DAT013: 0.30.40. Just minutes before, I note ' [Siraj Uddin] explains, particularly to [Kasim Ali]' (0.28.35). Interestingly, I also noted Kasim Ali's response during Abdul Lotif's reading (1.50.00), that he 'doesn't seem quite as enthusiastic now as he was when [Siraj Uddin] was reading (because he prefers [Siraj Uddin's] reading, the other *puthi*, or because he's sitting further away?).'

<sup>21</sup> I thought at the time that *Rag Horiboñsho* was a Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* of Hindu songs (as Abdul Lotif, on a previous occasion, had been adamant that Din Bhobanondo was a Hindu). Fazlur Rahman (1993: 17-25), however, in his brief biography of Din Bhobanondo in *Sylhetor Moromī Songit* ('Devotional Folk Songs of Sylhet'), writes that although Bhobanondo was born into a Brahman family, he converted to Islam later in life, changing his first name from Dij to Din.



wanted Abdul Lotif to continue reading from *Mohobbot Nama*. Although I note that I 'wasn't too upset' by this (after I had realised that I had recorded Abdul Lotif read or 'sing' from this *puthi* on a previous occasion<sup>22</sup>), my shadow was clearly increasing—interrupting Abdul Lotif to change tapes, and then trying to influence the *performance repertoire* because I had already recorded a hour's worth of reading from this *puthi*. Audience influence was stronger, though, and Abdul Lotif continued to read from *Mohobbot Nama* for another hour.

This again raises the issue of *choice*. Who chooses the *performance repertoire* in a *puthi-pora* event, and what does it consist of? Nazrul picks up on this when he highlights another feature of *audience involvement*—*laughter*. He writes: 'It's very rare (so far in our search) to see people laugh at the content of the *puthis*, but during this performance I notice lots of laughter.' Because Nazrul is unable to discern the cause of the laughter he makes a note to remind himself 'to look [in] the *puthi* to see where and what the humour is all about.' Later, when he sees a 'rise in the excitement of the people in their listening of the *puthi*' he again notes that he is 'moved to look... for [himself to see] what the story is all about', and concludes that it would be ideal to have the text with him so that he could read it in parallel with the reading. He makes the comment, however, that 'it [would] not be possible all the time, as we too do not know what *puthis* they have beforehand, to prepare ourselves.' Knowing who 'they' are is as crucial as knowing 'beforehand'.

#### *Section 7: Reader 4, Puthi 3, Dinner (11:30pm-12:30am)*

It is getting late. Abdul Lotif finishes a *puthi* section and I take the chance to change the mini DV tape. A new reader, Badsha Miah, who had arrived during Abdul Lotif's reading, now begins to read from the Bengali, *Joiguner Puthi*. His reading receives an immediate audience response—*joining in* at the end of the rhymed poetic lines.

**DK:** *At around 11:30pm, a new boyati entered, Badsha Miah. He took over from Abdul Lotif and started looking for a place to start reading in a Bengali puthi ("Joiguner Puthi"). This man was local and people immediately responded to his reading. Badsha Miah looked up and engaged the audience with his reading. He also paused his reading to explain at different points (although not as much as Siraj Uddin).*

*During this recitation, our host Asaddor Ali, who had been hovering around looking anxious for a while, came over to Nazrul and [me] to ask how long we were planning to stay. I THINK HIS MAIN CONCERN WAS THAT THE FOOD WAS READY.*

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<sup>22</sup> This was on February 21, 2005, at the first *puthi pora* event I attended in Islamnagar.

Figure 2.6: Badsha Miah (centre) reading from Joiguner Puthi. Photograph by Angela Kane.



*Nazrul tried to get Badsha Miah's attention (SOMETHING THE HOST SHOULD HAVE DONE IN RETROSPECT) but he didn't respond. [I say that the host should have done that, but if he was deferring to us as patrons—whether we viewed ourselves as such or not—then maybe it was appropriate for him ask Nazrul to interrupt?] We were starting to have more effect on the programme than we wanted. Badsha Miah may just have wanted to read to the end of the section which is fair enough. He did...and we stopped at around 12:10am and had something to eat (Chicken biriyani).*

**NI:** We get the third reader of the night [who goes] by [the] name of Mr. Badsha Miah of *Chaanghat* [Changhat]—*Horipur*. He read a Bangla *puthi* called *JOYGOON* [*Joigun*] and started to read from p.86. He seemed a popular reader. People wanted others not to make noise so that they could concentrate. I could...see two people speaking to one another and [heard] at one point the word “*bujsi*” (‘understood’). ...

At one point I heard Mr. Miah say “*Otho shundor beti mathia laab naa*” (literally translated ‘so pretty lady—not worth talking’). The term sounds ironic. What he is saying is that the lady looks beyond belief—but the phrase sounds contradictory. Mr. Miah it seems [is] getting carried away with the beauty of the lady and it shows in his glowing smiles as he is reading. This is one key moment in [the] reading [of] a story where the reader literally takes the story to be example of lived reality.

*Peer saab* came in to ask when to end the programme but we told him that it was their event and [so] it's up to him. *Peer saab* suggested that we have *Shinni* [*sinni*/*śirni*] ([a] meal—more on the tradition of religious occasions). *Peer saab* was waiting for us to decide but we left it to him and he said that we would break soon followed by *shinni* at about 12 midnight.

Thinking about the timing, I asked Mr. Miah to finish after reading three more pages. I heard at this point a very bad swear word from the same man [who swore

before]. I...[don't] understand why he suddenly came bursting [out] with these words. I guess this to be part and parcel of the man and his character. Mr. Miah made a comment as [he] read along, and another man agreed. I had to make a firm decision to end [the reading] by telling Mr Miah to finish after reading the page he was on as I was told by *Peer saab* to end the reading by 12 and it was past 12 already. While the reading was [continuing]...some people were doing the running commentary.

Badsha Miah's reading does not introduce any new categories, but it raises some that have already been located. In terms of *performance techniques* we see again the use of *eye contact* and *explanation* as non-musical means of engaging the audience—the former which is again linked with the audience response of *joining in* at the end of the rhymed poetic lines; and the latter, although it was not used as much as Siraj Uddin, it was nonetheless present and effective. We also see *performer involvement* manifested in *identification* with the characters of the narrative. *Audience involvement* is also seen in this same *identification* in commenting on the narrative and, as noted above, in response to the *performance technique* of *eye contact*, in *joining in* at the end of the rhymed poetic lines. The audience response Badsha Miah gets to his reading further challenges the supposition that change will inevitably lead to a time of audience distraction. Unlike Abdul Lotif taking over from Abdul Korim—in which there was a change of storyteller but the same story—no such thread of continuity was maintained here. Badsha Miah was a new reader and *Joigun* was a new *puthi*.

A change of storyteller and a change of story, then, do not necessarily lead to audience distraction. It did with Abdul Korim, but there were other, more pertinent, reasons for that. It did not with Abdul Lotif, but his was only a change of reader, and, from the audience reaction, a welcome one at that. So why did Badsha Miah receive such an immediate audience response? Aside from the *performance techniques* noted above, we are perhaps led to consider the *popularity* of a reader as being a significant factor. Other categories of *audience involvement* notwithstanding, the contexts which led to the outbursts of one audience member appear to indicate this. This man is first recorded swearing during Siraj Uddin's reading when it is suggested that there should be a change of *puthi*-reader. On this (second) occasion, Nazrul does not reveal what is said, but evidently this man did not want Badsha Miah to stop.<sup>23</sup> He did not react like this when Abdul Korim or Abdul Lotif stopped, though, so we have to conclude that it was because Siraj Uddin and Badsha Miah were the more local readers. This would

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<sup>23</sup> Perhaps he also resented the fact that the request for Badsha Miah to stop reading came from us.

account for their *popularity*, and for the outbursts of this man (which could have been indicative of the audience as a whole) to suggestions that they should stop reading, or be replaced.

The above situation—Nazrul asking Badsha Miah to stop reading, and the man swearing in response—occurred, primarily, because the food was ready. For how long it had been ready I do not know, but *Pīr* Ali was getting anxious and wanted to know when the performance was going to end. This may have been an indication that he had deferred control of the event to us, or at least that he was showing us courtesy by not interrupting the performance without warning (and possibly both). Either way, it was left to Nazrul to interrupt Badsha Miah which led to the outburst. After Badsha Miah finished reading, we were served Chicken *Biriyani* (which Nazrul refers to as *sinni/śirni*). Was it for *this* meal that my patronage was required?

#### *Section 8: A 'Typical' End? (12:30-1:10am)*

It is now past midnight; everyone has eaten. Will anything else happen tonight, or will people disperse and go home? I was happy with what I had already recorded, but I did not want to leave if the event was to continue. Maybe others were waiting to see if we were staying or going. How long do these events last anyway?

**DK:** *After we had eaten, around 12:30am, Mujib wanted to know whether we should go. I wanted to know whether the recital was going to continue or whether other people were also going to go. Whether the programme continued for us I don't know, but Abdul Lotif picked up his Sylheti-Nagri puthi of Hindu songs ["Rag Horiboñsho"] and started singing. There was a general lack of concentration at this point. Abdul Lotif's sidekick Monu Miah started joining in with Abdul Lotif. After a couple of the Hindu songs Monu Miah sang a couple of songs (from memory). Badsha Miah and Abdul Lotif also sang a song each before Monu Miah finished with a final song.*

*Asaddor Ali was looking restless throughout these songs. I was wondering whether it was to do with the nearby [head of] madrasa's views on music, but after the songs had finished, he brought out a portable cassette player and played a couple of Amir Uddin songs! I WAS PRETTY CONFUSED AT WHAT WAS GOING ON AT THIS POINT. The DAT and mini DV tapes had run out as had the Edirol batteries but I decided that it wasn't worth capturing these final moments. [Why did I decide that? Wasn't this just as much a part of the performance as the puthi reading had been? Was I only interested in recording examples of puthi-pora but content to disregard the context in which it occurred?] After a couple of songs were blasted out of the cassette player, the evening was over. AT EVERY PUTHI RECITAL WE'VE BEEN TO SO FAR THEY'VE ALL FINISHED WITH SOME SONGS. IS THAT NORMAL?*

**NI:** Mr. Latif started singing from the book of Nagri songs. It was very interesting to see the songs [from the *puthi*] come alive in songs [performed] ...[a] unique experience [up] to this point—as most of what we [have heard] from [the] *puthis* [has been]...

long narratives. People...joined in with the singing. This kind of group involvement can be experienced only through songs. What I mean is that although some people know about the content of the *puthis*... [they do] not [know it] to the degree that they know a song, so for them knowing a song is easier and [the content more readily] at hand, whereas the long narrative is not—and because of...knowing the song, they seem to enjoy...taking part in the singing. While the singing was going on they wanted to shut the door—possibly because of the noise reaching the *moulavi*'s ears.

Mr. Monu Miah suddenly started to sing and sounded very nice. I have not heard him sing with instruments but [have] often wondered what it would be like [to hear] him singing with instruments accompanying [him]. ...

A man from outside shouted out that each of the singers has to sing two songs each. ... Badsha Miah started to sing a Shitalong [Sitalong] Shah song; ...the song seems [to be a] very popular one as everyone started to join in the excitement. Mr. Latif then sang a...popular song...which got the audience excited. Latif mentions his name in the song. I wonder, is it his song? I mean did he write it or [is he] just putting his name [in] as [the] singer? [It] would be very unusual if he is using his name in the song when he is not the writer. Mr. Monu starts to sing another song—this time Arkum Shah's song.

Suddenly *Peer saab* comes in with a tape recorder...and then starts to play very loudly an audiotape of the songs of Amir Uddin. This was very odd in many ways ... [a] few hours ago he was saying that [the] playing of music was forbidden in his bari and now he is playing music full blast. I was familiar with the song...it was about Gausal Azam. So what started off with *puthi* reading ended with...Amir Uddin's songs.

These final events raise questions relating to *sequence* and *performance length*. Do songs, taking the *puthi-pora* event as a whole, function as some kind of performance finale? Must there always be songs, or does their singing depend on the whim of the host, performer, or audience? It is interesting that the singing begins with songs from *Rag Horiboñsho*, a Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*. In this instance, was Abdul Lotif 'reading' or 'singing' these songs? Here we revisit an issue raised in chapter 1—whether singing a song from a *puthi* is, by definition, 'singing', or whether it should still be defined as 'reading'. A related issue is how *puthis* are *classified*; whether any distinction is made between *puthis* consisting (primarily) of narratives and *puthis* consisting (primarily) of songs. The *sequence of events* also relates, of course, to *performance length*. What must take place before the whole event can be concluded? From beginning to end, this event had lasted just over four-and-a-half hours.

Documented in our accounts are a number of responses to these songs, mine and Nazrul's included. Interestingly, whereas I note only a 'lack of concentration' on the part of the audience, Nazrul records their response as *joining in* with excitement. He also refers to the request of one individual who shouts that 'each of the singers has to sing two songs each.' The audience response to these songs, it seems, was general

approval.<sup>24</sup> This was also Nazrul's response to Monu Miah's singing particularly. The fact that Nazrul expresses a desire to hear Monu Miah sing to musical accompaniment highlights a feature of this event which has so far been overlooked—that no musical instruments were present or used. The reading of *puthis* and the singing of songs were both unaccompanied. Is this *usual* in the context of a *puthi-pora* event, or was it just a feature of this one?<sup>25</sup>

Nazrul's thoughts about 'group', or audience involvement—in particular, how an audience is able to participate in the singing of songs to a much greater extent than during the reading of *puthis*—is interesting. His rationale is based upon their different contents; that songs are easier to memorise than narratives. Whether or not this can be sustained, Nazrul once again raises the issue of *audience involvement*, this time in the context of a measurable comparison.

During the course of these songs, in an act that confounded both of us, Pīr Ali decided to play Amir Uddin<sup>26</sup> songs at full blast from a portable cassette player! What possessed him to do this only he knows!<sup>27</sup> Although he did this in the context of the singing of songs, it seemed 'odd in many ways,' as Nazrul recounts, and not just because of his earlier comments about the head of the *madrasa*. It just seemed out of place, which is why 'I decided that it wasn't worth capturing these final moments.' Retrospectively, I questioned a response which had basically predetermined what was relevant in the context of a *puthi-pora* event and what was not. But more than that, it underscores again that I had a specific agenda in my research, one that did not always match the reality I discovered. Had I, in fact, approached this event with my own pre-conceived ideas of what did or did not constitute a *puthi-pora* event?

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<sup>24</sup> In comparison with RTO, DAT014, it is clear that the 'lack of concentration' was actually connected with the singing of songs from *Rag Horiboñshos*, rather than being a general state throughout.

<sup>25</sup> The lack of musical accompaniment on this occasion could be argued to be a specific response to the objections of the head of the local *madrasa*. The use (or non-use) of *musical instruments* in *puthi-pora*, however, is significant in determining how the genre is both understood and defined.

<sup>26</sup> Amir Uddin is a famous living Sylheti composer and folk singer.

<sup>27</sup> Although Pīr Ali had said that singing was forbidden in his *bari*, it is possible that because others were singing anyway, he thought that he might as well take the opportunity to listen to some of the songs that he liked while he could. The Amir Uddin song that Nazrul mentions is about Gausal Azam, the founder of the Maizbhandari branch (Torika) of Sufism. Music has a central role in Maizbhandari philosophy, and it may be that Pīr Ali, though generally submissive to the wishes of the local Imam, was making his own personal views known by playing these songs.

## Section 9: Packing Up and Participant Perceptions (1:10am)

The performance is over. As we begin to pack up we try to persuade the *puthi*-readers to part with their *puthis* for a few days so that we can photograph them as part of my documentation. Questions relating to the performance occasion are once again raised and we learn what the participants' think about who we are and what we are doing.

**DK:** *When we asked Asaddor Ali why they had put on this recital, he said they had done it for us! That wasn't what we had been told by Mujib. Mujib's friend Kasim Ali said that this was a programme that they had organised and invited us to. IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW WHOSE RESPONSE IS TRUER; PERHAPS IT WAS A BIT OF BOTH. THEY MAY HAVE BEEN PLANNING TO HAVE A RECITAL AT SOME POINT BUT FIXED THE DATE ON THE BASIS OF WHETHER WE COULD BE THERE...*

*When we asked the boyatis at the end of the programme whether we could take and photograph their puthis, they were initially reluctant. They did part with them in the end, but I was told that they needed them back for another programme on Saturday (the Bengali puthis anyway). THAT PROVED TO ME THAT THIS WAS NOT A ONE-OFF OCCASION. WHETHER ABDUL KORIM WAS A LOCAL AND REGULAR BOYATI I DON'T KNOW. THE SYLHETI-NAGRI PUTHIS AND THEIR READERS MAY HAVE BEEN BROUGHT IN FOR OUR BENEFIT. WHAT WAS AN EXCITING FIND [was] THAT ABDUL KORIM'S COPY OF "YUSUF-JULIKHA" [Mohobbot Nama] IS COMPLETE! IT HAD BOTH THE FRONT AND THE BACK COVER WHICH SEEMS PARTICULARLY RARE.*

*I was intrigued to know what peoples' [perceptions] were about who we are and what we're doing. Mujib told us afterwards that they thought Nazrul was a reporter for a foreign newspaper...they thought I was a white Imam who had converted to Islam (because I was wearing a kurta [long shirt], ṭupi [skull-cap], had a beard, and...a veiled wife)! When someone asked whether we were going to make CDs of the recital and sell them, Abdul Lotif remarked that no, we weren't going to sell our recordings because we don't need to, because we're loaded! NO WONDER HE KEEPS TURNING UP TO ALL THESE RECITALS! IT'S A FAIR ASSUMPTION BUT NOT ONE I [want] TO PROPAGATE OR ENCOURAGE. ... [Should I have been surprised? Did I think it was only Abdul Lotif who thought that because he was the only one to say so?]*

**NI:** *We...[started]...packing [up] our stuff to...[begin] heading back to Sylhet. We had a very emotional farewell, as usual in most of these readings. We only get to see and know them for a while and leave them but I guess we will stay in their memory far longer, mostly because of Dave and Angela being there. I am the insider/outsider... I can be one and [the]...other at the same time—I mean British/Bengali (Sylheti). I for one will remember the events for [a] great many years to come. On the way back from the bari I could see some people who were [at] the readings walking about the streets—very...reminiscent... [of] concert goers going to tube stations after a gig at Wembley—only difference is [that] they don't have T-shirts, posters, etc., hanging around them like they do in England of their favourite group/singers.*

*I was talking to the ['baby' taxi] driver on the way back [asking] if this was his first attendance at a *puthi* reading. He said that it was first time that he [had] attended the readings and liked [it] very much.*

*We were talking on the way back about how the night went and...Mujib [told us]...some of the things people...[had said about] us. ...some [people] thought that I was a reporter. ...some people thought that Dave was a convert to Islam, maybe because of his beard and [because he was] wearing [a] *punjabi* [*pañjābi*, another word for a long shirt] and a *Tupi* [*tupi*]. Likewise [because] of the way Angela was*



dressed, [they thought that] she too was [a] convert to Islam. At one point Mujib [said] that Mr. Latif said that Dave was loaded with money. The actual words used by Latif were something like “*Thaar laagi poysha kuno shomoisha naay!*” (‘For him, money is no problem!’). I thought it was so hilarious the way... Latif described Dave’s financial status and also the way Mujib was telling us. I felt ...pain in my stomach as I...laughed so much at [these] remarks by Latif via Mujib.

We eventually arrived in Shibgonj after a hard night’s wanderings. ...

Some of my earlier suspicions about *why* and *for whom* this event had been organised were now justified by Asaddor Ali’s response to my question. Wanting me to pay for the event, deferring to Nazrul and me during the course of the event, and here, stating that they had arranged this event for us explicitly. Abdul Korim and Abdul Lotif may have been invited especially, to appease my desire to hear Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* being read. This would explain why the audience responded so positively to Siraj Uddin and Badsha Miah and so badly to Abdul Korim as suggested above. The positive response Abdul Lotif received may simply have been due to the relief of a new reader; he may not have been invited to this event at all. He was a main reader at the first *puthi-pora* event I attended, also dominant in the second, and, if he knew that I was attending this event, perhaps decided to further make his presence known.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the reasoning, the categories of *performance arrangements*, *number of performers*, and *performance frequency* are again raised here. To these we might add *motivation*: why are performances organised at all? Why do performers read *puthis*? Why do the audience want to listen to them being read? To *motivation* we might add *function*: what are the purposes of these events? What *function* does *puthi-pora* fulfil in present-day Sylheti society (as similar or different from the past)? These questions get close to the heart of the thesis hypothesis: that *puthi-pora* was used as a vehicle for the spread of Islam in Bengal. Another category that is perhaps so obvious that it might be overlooked is the *puthi* itself—the focal *object of performance*. My account above highlights what turned out to be a rarity in relation to the *condition* of the *puthi*, that Abdul Korim’s copy of *Mohobbot Nama* had both its front and back cover and, therefore, the first and last pages of the *puthi*.

There was another individual at the event that is yet to receive a mention—the ‘baby’ taxi driver who drove us to and from the event, and waited for us while it took

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<sup>28</sup> Abdul Lotif’s response to my financial status may indicate part of his motivation for attending this event (on the back of the other two). It may also have been due to his wanting his name to be firmly established in my mind as the ‘best’ *puthi*-reader.



place. Nazrul records that this was the first time he had ever attended a *puthi-pora* event. This may seem like an innocuous piece of information, but we might well ask, why had this man not attended such an event before? What does this say about the *widespread knowledge* or *popularity* of this tradition?

As well as gaining impressions and perceptions of others at the event, I was intrigued to know what peoples' perceptions were about who we were and what they thought we were doing. From the comments shared with us (and not all of them may have been!), it was obviously unclear to those who attended who we—Nazrul, Ang, and I—were and what our motivation was for being at the event. It also underlines the fact that our presence did not go unnoticed; we were there, casting our shadows on all that unfolded.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

My experience of *puthi-pora*, as I had opportunity to observe it, involved a repeated and conscious evaluation of every detail and its meaning. This is evident throughout my fieldnote account (as it is in Nazrul's), particularly in the voice of 'reflection'. But the whole process of analysis, which involved re-combing the ground, again displays that same conscious experience—an inevitable one if both the sequence of events, and the categories and schemas associated with them, are to be processed and understood correctly. As stated at the outset, however, the experiences of one event (even if there are two experiences) are not adequate grounds for determining what is *usual* and what is not. Having located and elicited categories and schemas from this one event, what now remains is to assemble them into thematic groups which can be used to compare the details of this one event with others.

This cannot be done without some difficulty, however. Part of the difficulty is simply deciding whether an elicited 'element' is a single category, a meta-category, a schema, or a sub-schema (or more than one). For example, what is *location*? I referred to it as a category above, but it could equally be classed as a sub-schema, with its own 'patterns of generalized associations' and related categories. Another difficulty lies in defining the relationships that exist between categories, meta-categories, schemas, and sub-schemas, and their hierarchies. A further difficulty arises in representation. What is the best way to represent fluid and multilayered relationships?

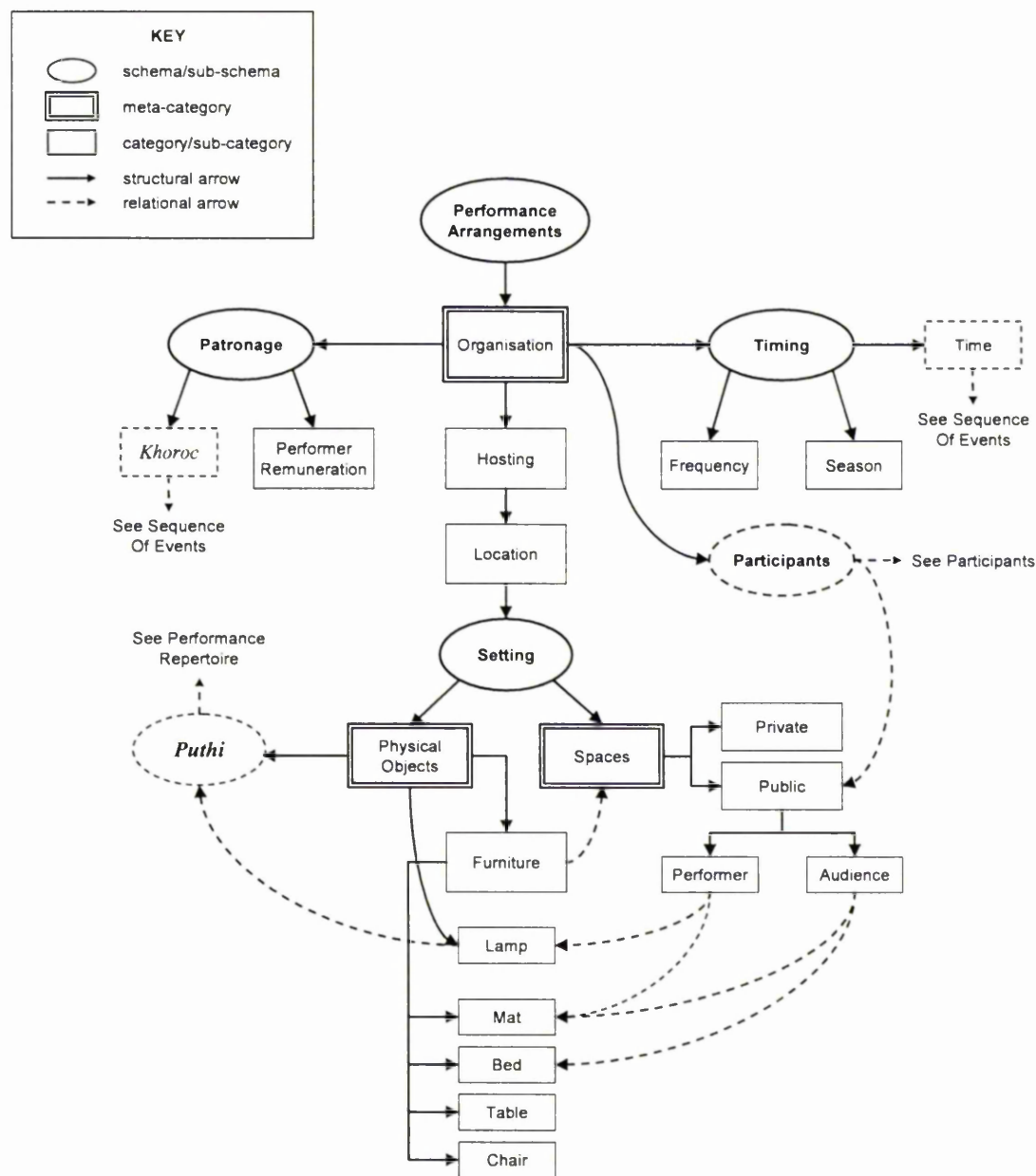
Despite these difficulties, I have created schematic diagrams to represent these relationship in four thematic groups—*performance arrangements*, *sequence of events*, *performance repertoire*, and *participant involvement and interaction*. I have used two different shapes in the diagrams to distinguish between schemas/sub-schemas (ovals), categories (single-framed rectangles) and meta-categories (double-framed rectangles). Two different kinds of arrows are used to show the relationships between them—full-lined arrows indicate a hierarchical, or a ‘structural’, relationship; dashed-lined arrows indicate a ‘relational’ rather than ‘structural’ interaction.<sup>29</sup> Categories or schemas that are represented with dashed-lines indicate that they are also used in another schematic diagram (which is also mentioned).

The diagram in Figure 2.7 represents *performance arrangements*. This is the principle theme to which the other sub-schemas, meta-categories and categories in the diagram relate. *Organisation*, the meta-category that follows, is the natural first step in arranging a performance. Part of the organisational process involves deciding when an event will take place (*timing*), who will attend (*participants*), and how much it will cost (*patronage*). These sub-schematic elements (or sub-sub-schemas), with their own related categories are drawn from the wider Bengali musical culture, along with many other elements of the schema that follow. *Organisation* also involves deciding on who will host the event (*hosting*), if there is more than one person involved in this process. This will affect where a performance will take place (*location*), which also determines its *setting*. *Setting* is sub-schematic, shaped by two meta-categories—*physical objects* and *spaces*. The former consists of *furniture* (*mats*, *beds*, *tables*, *chairs*, in the March 9 event), *lem* (or lamp), and the *puthi*, the principal performance object (its own sub-schema represented in Figure 2.9). *Spaces* are divided into *public* and *private*. While *public spaces* are largely defined by *performer* and *audience*, they can also be defined and affected by *physical objects* of *furniture*, indicated by the relational arrows.<sup>30</sup> The arrows from *performer*-to-*lamp*-to-*puthi* show a *performers’* interaction with the *lem* in reading a *puthi*.

<sup>29</sup> A key representing this information is shown in top left-hand corner of all four diagrams.

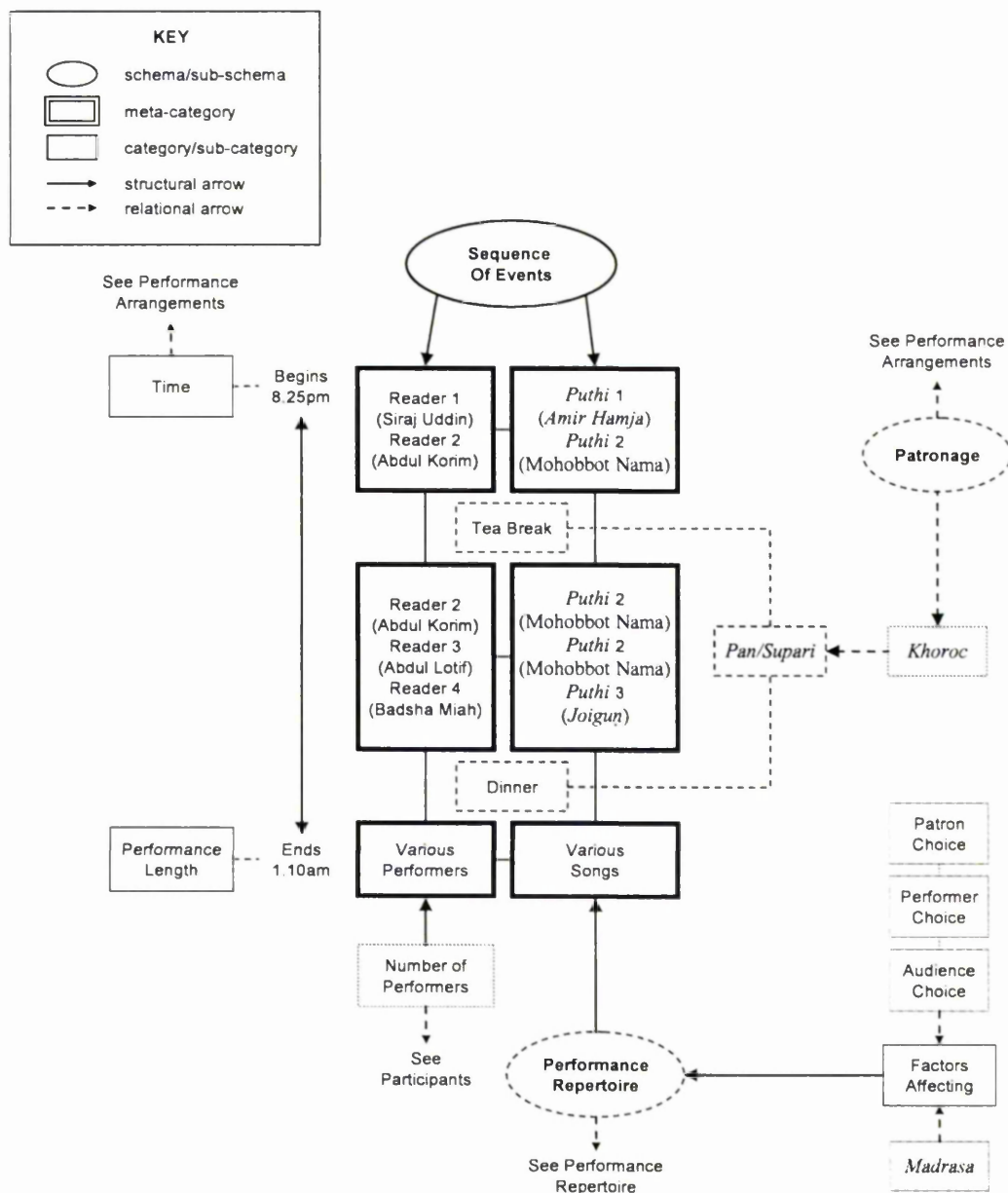
<sup>30</sup> For example, the *performers* sat on *mats* on the floor provided by the host. *Audience* members also sat on *mats* on the floor on both sides of, and perpendicular to, the *performers* as well as on one of the *beds*. In this instance then, the *mats* and the *bed* created the *performer* and *audience spaces*.

Figure 2.7: Schematic Diagram Representing Performance Arrangements



The *sequence of events* diagrammed in Figure 2.8 is inevitably specific but the categories and schemas they relate to are much more general. The vertical time-line indicates when the event on Wednesday, March 9, 2005 began and ended (8.25pm-1.10am). This highlights categories such as *time* and *performance length* (4 hours, 45 minutes). The specific *sequence of events* is listed in vertical order alongside the time-line, the individual performers and their material shown in parallel (e.g. Reader 1, Siraj Uddin, reads from *Puthi* 1, *Amir Hamja*). The category, *number of performers*, is elicited from this left-hand column. This has a direct effect on both the *sequence of*

Figure 2.8: Schematic Diagram Representing the Sequence of Events (Wednesday, March 9, 2005)



events and performance length. The *puthis* and songs listed in the right-hand column constitute the *performance repertoire* (a thematic group and sub-schema diagrammed separately in Figure 2.9). This event was punctuated by *tea-* and *dinner-breaks* and *pan/supari* was served throughout. These categories are part of the *khoroc* for which *patronage* is required (which links back to *performance arrangements* and Figure 2.7). Introduced here is a category labelled *factors affecting*. This category seeks to show—with the aid of relational arrows—how certain factors may affect the choices behind a *performance repertoire*, either before or during a performance.

Figure 2.9: Schematic Diagram Representing Performance Repertoire

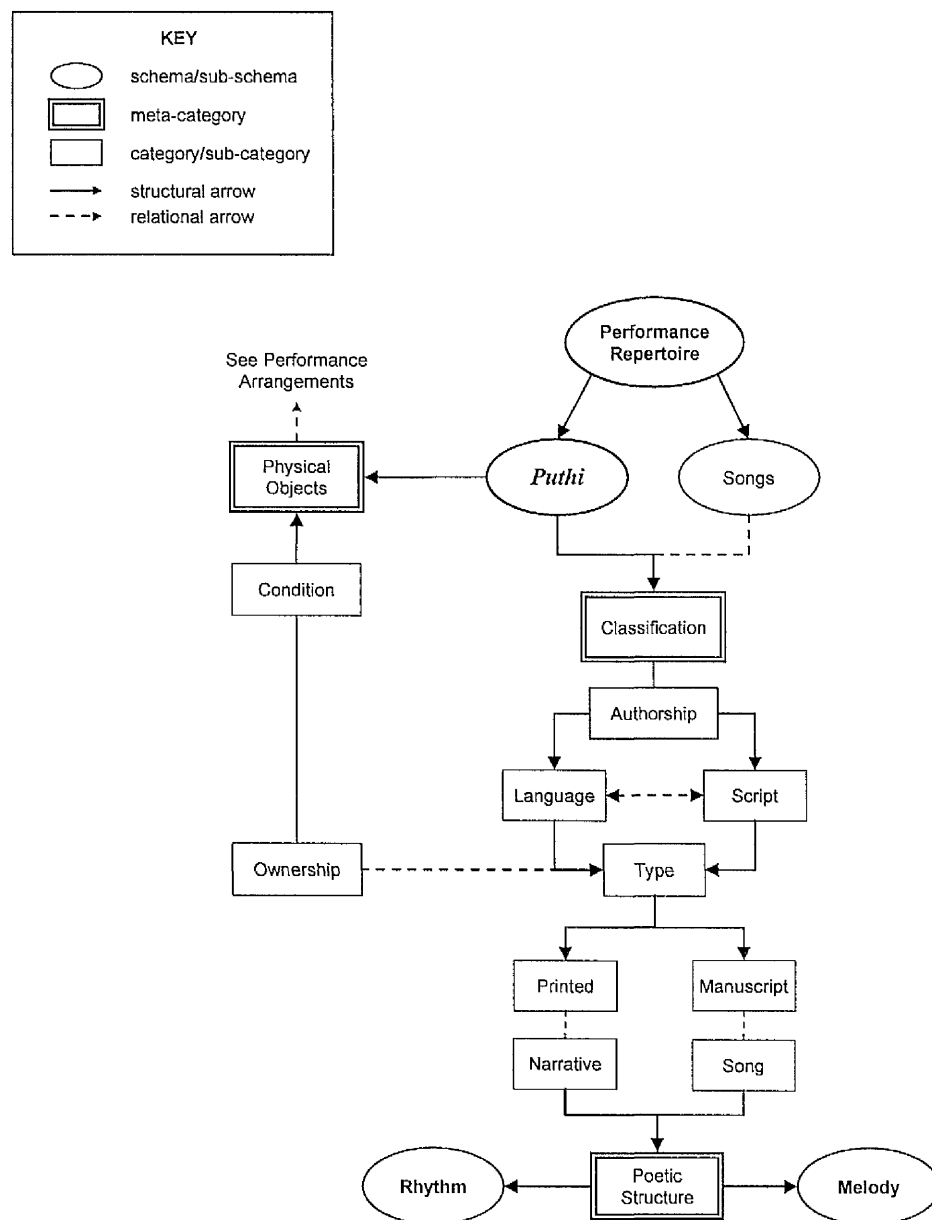
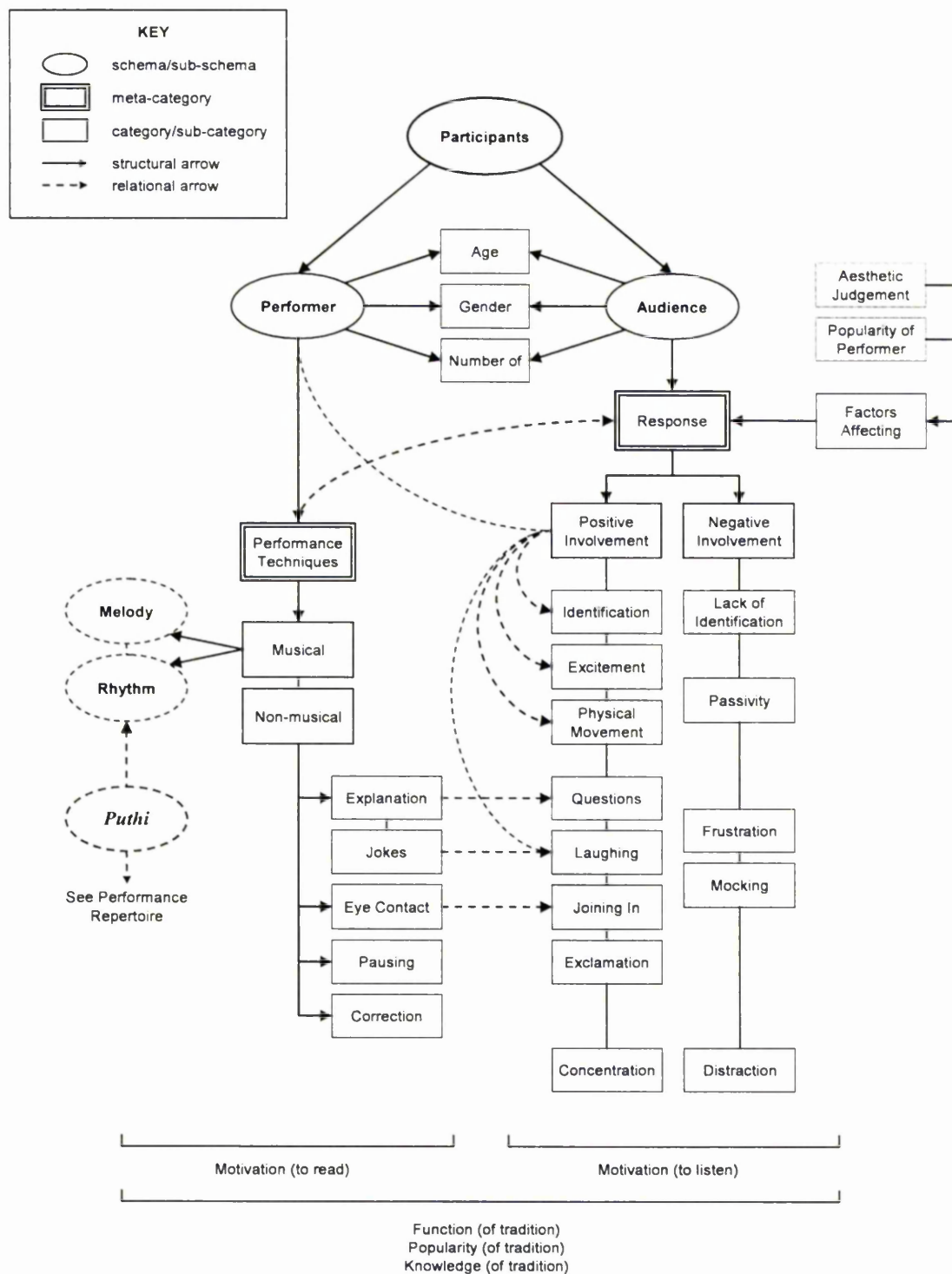


Figure 2.9 focuses on *performance repertoire*, the content of the performance event. As we saw above, this consists of *puthis* (linked back here to the meta-category *physical objects* and Figure 2.7) and *songs*, both sub-schemas of this thematic group. While the *songs* schema could receive much more attention, *songs* are not the subject of immediate concern and so are not expanded. Of the sub-categories of *classification* (*language*, *script*, and *type*), *puthi-type* is further divided into *printed* and *manuscript*, *narrative* and *song*. Whether the content is *narrative* or *song* determines what *poetic structure* is used in their composition, which in turn influences the *melody* and *rhythm*

employed in their delivery. Although *melody* and *rhythm* are dictated to a large extent by the *puthi's poetic structure*, they are schemas in their own right, and are subject to wider musico-cultural influences. The connection between *authorship* and *language, script* and *type*, conveys that these classificatory sub-categories are determined by the will and pen of the *author*.

The final thematic group looks at the *interaction* between, and *involvement* of, the *participants* of a *puthi-pora* event, *performer* and *audience*. Both are represented as sub-schemas in Figure 2.10. Categories of *age*, *gender*, and *number* relate to both *performer* and *audience*, and have an effect on the level of *interaction* that is possible between them (particularly *gender*). The relational arrow between the meta-categories of *performance techniques* and *audience response* is meant to indicate the effect the former can have on the latter. *Performance techniques* available to the *performer* consist of *musical* and *non-musical* kinds (the *musical* techniques of *melody* and *rhythm* link back to the *puthi* and *performance repertoire*). Of the five *non-musical performance technique* categories, only *explanation*, *jokes* (linked to *explanation*), and *eye contact* seemed to generate a specifically observable *audience response*—*questions*, *laughing*, and *joining in*, three categories of *positive involvement*. Of these three categories, *laughing* was also shared by *performers*, as were other categories of *positive involvement* such as *identification*, *excitement*, and *physical movement*. In this way, the *performer* also became a part the *audience*. But not all *audience response* was positive (as we saw in relation to Abdul Korim's reading). The category *negative involvement* lists a number of sub-categories that are, in many ways, the antitheses of their positive counterparts (e.g. *distraction* and not *concentration*). *Factors affecting* a positive or a negative response seemed to be due to the use of *aesthetic judgement* and the *popularity of performer*. The bottom of the diagram shows brackets which contain elements that are neither categories nor schemas—they signify a personal dimension. What *motivates* a performer to read a *puthi*, and what *motivates* an audience to listen? These *motivations* are, in turn, affected by the *participants'* perspective on what the *function* of the tradition is. *Motivation* to read or listen will also affect and be affected by the *popularity* of the tradition and its widespread *knowledge*.

Figure 2.10: Schematic Diagram Representing Participant Involvement and Interaction



These four schematic diagrams have been created to simplify the analysis, not to indicate separateness between thematic groups. It is only when they are understood together that they represent a connected framework for the *puthi-pora* event that took place on Wednesday, March 9, 2005. The thematic groups within this framework will now be used in a comparison with other events in the following two chapters. Chapter 3 will consider *Performance Arrangements, Participant Involvement and Interaction*, and the *Sequence of Events*. *Performance repertoire* will be considered in Chapter 4. As the different categories and schemas are compared across events, they will also be discussed in relation to the hypothesis.



## Considering Context: Arrangements, Participants, and Occasions

*We think in generalities, but we live in detail.*  
Alfred North Whitehead, 1861-1947.

Detail is the stuff of our lives. Were we not able to think in generalities, we would not be able to survive; detail would overwhelm us. This ‘ability...greatly reduces memory load,’ writes Snyder (2000:82), ‘but at the cost of the ability to remember much of the fine detail of experience.’ Documenting Nazrul’s and my experiences of *puthi-pora* in the March 9 event was an attempt to capture and retain as much of the ‘fine detail’ as possible. The purpose of this chapter is to consider some of this detail in relation to the details of other similarly documented events in order to establish what is generally applicable to all of them. For if *puthi-pora* is to be defined as *x*, *y* or *z*,<sup>1</sup> it is important to know on what grounds such definitions are made; and, if *puthi-pora* as defined as *x*, *y* or *z* in the present is to speak into the past, it is important to discern whether such definitions are consistent with the hypothesis—that *puthi-pora* was used as a vehicle for Islamisation in Bengal—in its details. This chapter seeks to do both in regard to context. The details of performance context are represented by the various categories and schemas diagrammed in three of the four thematic groups created in the previous chapter: *Performance Arrangements*, *Participant Involvement and Interaction* and the *Sequence of Events*. These three thematic groups constitute the three main sections of the chapter, acting as frameworks for a comparison of their component parts. Where possible, I attempt to understand the relevance of each to the hypothesis, drawing both from historical sources, and from my observations of contemporaneous parallel Hindu traditions of book and manuscript reading.

<sup>1</sup> After all, what are definitions if not the products of generalisation?

## The Performance Arrangements

We begin by considering how *puthi-pora* events take place today: Who organises and patronises them? Where do they take place and when? What constitutes their setting? Because of their central place in the initial diffusion of Islam, one may expect that the institutions established by the religious gentry as nuclei for the newly formed peasant communities—the mosques and shrines—would be significant centres for *puthi-pora*. One would also think that the spiritual leaders attached to these two institutions would be involved in organising events; for, even during the time of Islamic reform, village Mullahs read out passages from *puthis* ‘as part of [their] programme of Islamization’ (Ahmed 1988:xxii). One may also assume by extension that the organisation of events would coincide with ritually-significant times in the Islamic calendar; that *puthi-pora* would add semantic depth to other ‘parts’ of the Islamisation programme. In addition, if the above assumptions are maintained, one may expect that the immediate setting would also be affected by those ritually-significant objects and spaces that surround, or are contained within it. But are these expectations justified? All such questions will be considered under the following four headings—*Location and Setting, Organisation and Patronage, Times and Seasons*, and *Objects and Spaces*—which are derived from the schematic diagram represented in Figure 3.1.

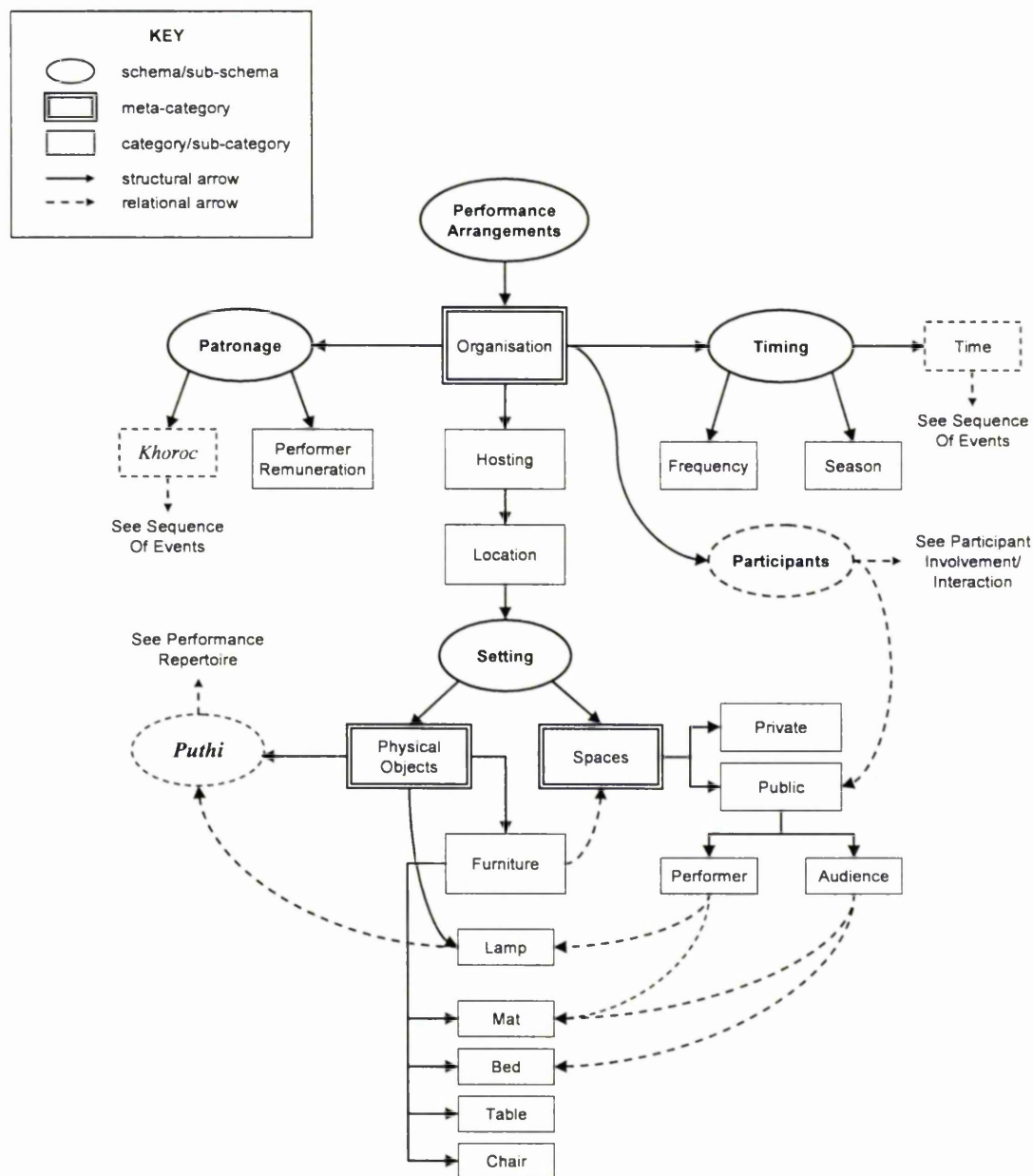
### *Location and Setting*

Situated in the north-east of Bangladesh, Sylhet (the name of a Town, a District and a Division) is on the easternmost extreme of the (former) East Bengal frontier. The *East Pakistan District Gazetteer* says that in the Town there ‘is not a single road without a *mokam* or tomb by its side and there is hardly a hill which does not contain the grave of a saint’ (Rizvi ed. 1970:94). Throughout the District, too, writes Adams (1987:4), from the beginning of the fourteenth century, ‘the three hundred and sixty saints [of Shah Jalal<sup>2</sup>] were dispatched to various corners...where they established themselves as teachers and were venerated by their converts, and in their turn commemorated by well tended shrines.’ The process of building shrines ‘over the graves of holy men’ in Sylhet received state-sponsorship during the Mughal regime, Eaton (1993:265) states, as did the establishing of mosques and Qur’an schools ‘that would regularize the links between the laborers and formal Islam’ as part of the agrarian expansion. The plethora

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<sup>2</sup> Shah Jalal is generally acknowledged to have brought Islam to Sylhet in 1303.

Figure 3.1: Schematic Diagram Representing Performance Arrangements



of Islamic institutions in Sylhet today (particularly shrines) shows just how pervasive this process was. Taken together with the knowledge that many Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* contain the teachings of now-enshrined saints, who were their authors, the assumption that *puthi-pora* would be linked to their shrines is certainly plausible.

This is what I assumed when I began my fieldwork, and this may be a context for the performance of some *puthis*. As we shall see in the next chapter, there are two main *puthi*-types—those that are widely available, or ‘mainstream’, and those that are

less available, which tend to be 'esoteric'. It is the performance of this latter *puthi*-type which may be associated with the shrines of their authors, but I was unable to observe them. In the March 9 event, and in the other two events I attended, it was the 'mainstream' *puthis* that were read. These events took place in someone's *bari*.

*Bari* can be translated 'house' or 'home'. It has connotations of a childhood or ancestral home, rather than a rented or temporary residence (as *basa* does). The *bari* is often, but not always, located in a village, and these two words—*bari* and village—if not inseparable, conjure up almost identical images. In fact, whenever I asked people residing in Sylhet Town about *puthi-pora*, it almost always triggered memories of the tradition stemming back to their village childhoods, rather than suggestions of where I could go to observe it now in the town (although I was occasionally told which village to go to). *Matir Moyna* (The Clay Bird, 2002), Tarek Masud's award-winning film, shows a *puthi-pora* event as one of a number of musical traditions woven throughout the storyline, indicating both that it was a typical part of Bengali village life in the late 1960s, and that the practice still takes place in this context today. According to the official website, the film was 'shot on actual locations in rural settings and small towns'.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing to prevent *puthi-pora* from taking place in an urban setting;<sup>4</sup> it is just not so typical.

The two rectangular boxes in Figure 3.2 below represent the two geographical areas in Sylhet District where I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in 2005. This was largely due to access. Mujib was my contact for the area represented by the top rectangle (locations visited in the sub-districts of Jointapur and Gowainghat).<sup>5</sup> Nazrul was my contact for the area represented by the bottom rectangle (locations visited in the sub-district of Golabgonj). Both geographical areas and the locations within them were some way outside of Sylhet Town, in more rural surroundings. Most unusual was Asaddor Ali's *bari*. It '*was the largest and most modern bari we've seen for a puthi-pora recital so far*', especially as it had '*concrete walls...a corrugated iron roof ...[and] electricity*' (fieldnotes).

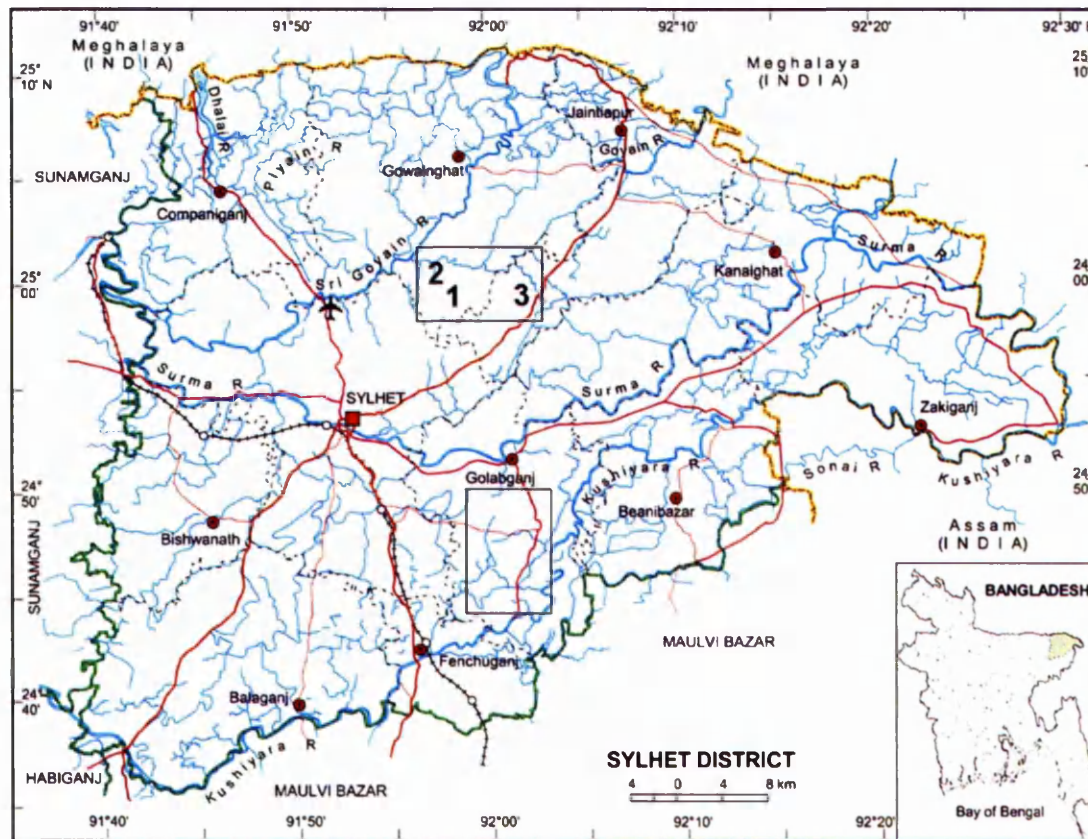
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<sup>3</sup> These 'actual locations' are in the district of Faridpur, Dhaka Division, the director's birth-place. See <<http://www.matirmoina.com>> and <<http://ctmasud.web.aplus.net/about/>> Accessed 22/02/07.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a couple of the *puthi*-readers I interviewed claimed to have gone to Sylhet Town to read.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 1, 2, and 3 (in Figure 3.2, below) indicate the order and approximate location of three public *puthi-pora* events I attended in these areas. The first took place in Islamnagar, Fotehpur, Boronagar, Gowainghat, on Monday February 21, 2005; the second in Baurbag, on Wednesday March 2, 2005; the third, on Wednesday March 9, 2005, in Horipur, Jointapur.

Figure 3.2: Locations of *puthi-pora* observed in Sylhet District



The setting of Asaddor Ali's *bari* did not match the rural stereotype depicted by *Matir Moyna* and which exist in the memories of the Sylhet Town residents. The February 21 and March 2 events did match this stereotype, however—particularly the first. Not only was it some way from the Tamabil Road (the road heading north-east from Sylhet Town) along a smaller dirt road, but our transport could not take us all the way. From a lay-by in the road we had to walk about a kilometre across paddy fields to get to Member-Sab's (host for the occasion) *bari*, which had mud-covered walls, a bamboo-thatched roof, and no electricity. The *puthis* were read by the light of a *lem*, that most iconic symbol of rural life.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the superficial differences in the settings of each of these events, the significant commonality was that they all took place in someone's home (as did all the other instances of *puthi-pora* I observed throughout Golabganj) rather than at a shrine or a mosque as we might have expected. That the *bari* is a common setting for *puthi-pora* was confirmed by the performers, either inside a room, or in the courtyard of the

<sup>6</sup> See the photograph on the title page.

*bari* (as portrayed in *Maṭir Moyna*), depending on the number of people who attend. The Islamic institutions may have been the base from which Islam historically spread, but its diffusion reached right into the heart of the peasant communities—their homes. This was crucial, for it was in the home that the Hindu traditions were propagated. As Roy (1983:58) states, “‘In every house the Hindus and Muslims’ took themselves ‘with avid interest’ to the Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārat*’ (emphasis mine), and thereby, the Muslims “‘remained immersed in stories and fictions.’” The *bari*, today, continues to be the key context for the reading of the *Mohabharot* and other Hindu books. The success of the cultural mediators (and reformers) in providing alternative material for the Muslim masses, however, is captured in Bhuiya’s (2000:55, 60) claim for *Halotun Nobi*, ‘the most popular book’ in Sylheti-Nagri, which, he maintains, ‘is read in every [M]uslim household of Sylhet and Cachar [D]istrict’ (emphasis mine). This is a little hyperbolic, but it makes the point: Islamisation in Bengal is so widespread because it was propagated in peoples’ homes.

### *Organisation and Patronage*

I was told that the March 9 event had been organised by locals for locals. This may or may not have been the case as I suggested in the previous chapter, but if the event had been arranged for my benefit, as I suspected, it would indicate a certain flexibility that would challenge one of the assumptions made above—namely, that *puthi-pora* events would need to be organised by a spiritual leader. This assumption was also dependent, in part, on the mosque or shrine being its performance setting, which, as we have seen above, is not ordinarily the case. Ultimately, I do not know who organised the March 9 event. Mujib was involved in its facilitation; *Pīr* Ali, *khadim* (caretaker) of the local shrine, was its host. This role may have given *Pīr* Ali a measure of localised spiritual authority, but the March 9 event had no obvious connection with the saint (Shah Ahmed Ali) with whose shrine he was associated, and he did not act like, nor was he treated as, the spiritual leader of the event, as we shall see later. Indeed, nothing was said in my interviews with the *puthi*-readers that would indicate the involvement of institutional leadership at all. Two performance contexts were mentioned—public and private (or formal and informal)—but neither appear to have any explicit link with the

‘programmes’ of mosque or shrine. The organisation of events in both contexts seems surprisingly ordinary.<sup>7</sup>

The initiative for organising a public event is not usually taken by the *puthi*-reader, or his (or her) immediate family, but by invitation (from outside) to a specific *puthi*-reader by an individual or a group. The *puthi*-reader is usually invited to come and read from a specific *puthi* (or to read a specific story from a specific *puthi*). Some *puthi*-readers claim to be invited every day to read *puthis*, and will go wherever they are invited. Public events are not formally advertised, however, so an audience may or may not be invited. If invitations are extended it is through word of mouth; others will just ‘turn up’. It is through these public events that *puthi*-readers get known for their ability, either to read *puthis* in general terms, or as the person who can read such-and-such a *puthi*. For the audience members, their attendance and exposure to a particular *puthi*-reader or to a specific *puthi*, may lead them to extend an invitation to the same *puthi*-reader to come and read for them in their *bari*.

The initiative for organising a private event, however, is usually taken by the *puthi*-reader, or his (or her) immediate family. A *puthi*-reader may either read alone, silently; or aloud in the presence of family members and close neighbours. There is no need for invitation. This context is marked by spontaneity and intimacy. While male readers read in both public and private contexts, private events are more typically the domain of female readers, as women will not read in public in front of men (except for the men of their own families). Neighbouring women will gather to listen (perhaps by invitation, but probably not), but it is extremely rare for a female reader to receive an invitation to read from outside her family (which is not to say that it cannot ever happen). Ahmed (1988:xxii) hints at this private context for performance, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when he says that ‘many rural Muslims bought these tracts in the absence of an appropriate religious work in Bengali’, and that those ‘who knew the rudiments of the language, bought [them] for their own use.’ The difference between public and private contexts appears to be nothing more than whether the *puthi*-reader stays at their *bari* to read, or whether they are invited to read elsewhere, to someone else’s *bari*.

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<sup>7</sup> Although I was proactive in seeking out opportunities to observe and record *puthi-pora*, as I was not directly involved in organising any of the events I attended. My knowledge and understanding of this process, therefore, is based on interactions with my contacts (Mujib and Nazrul) in their arrangements, and, primarily, on my interviews with the *puthi*-readers.



As public events involve hosting, they also require patronage. The individual who extends the invitation normally hosts the event and is responsible for its expenses (*khoro*c). If an event is group-initiated the group will decide, if not on a specific host, then on a specific location for the event. The *khoro*c, however, will likely be divided between the group involved in organising the event, or among those who express an interest in attending. As Figure 3.1 indicates, *khoro*c is a category of patronage. In the March 9 event, this was necessary to provide tea, 'toast', and *mu*ri (for the tea-break), Chicken *biryani* (for dinner), and *pan* (offered throughout). During the February 21 event it was also necessary, as food was again offered during the tea-break (tea for the participants, coke for Angela and me) and for dinner (chicken *pilau*). *Pan* was again available throughout. Dinner was not provided in the March 2 event but there were two tea-breaks in which tea and *mu*ri were served as well as *pan*. That something was offered in each event (regardless of what it was) reveals a principle of hospitality that is common to all. Whenever I visited a Bengali home I was always given something to drink and some kind of snack (*nasta*), irrespective of the relative wealth or poverty of the individual or family. A 'good' host is a hospitable host. The more you give, the more you honour your guests. A *puthi-pora* event is no different. It is subject to these same cultural expectations, and the basic elements of something to drink (water and tea) and something to eat (*nasta*), are present in each at a bare minimum.

Another category of patronage, listed in the schematic diagram in Figure 3.1, though not prominent in the March 9 event, is performer remuneration. I do not know whether the *puthi*-readers were paid for this event or not. Although I contributed to the *khoro*c, I did not feel that remunerating the readers was my responsibility. I took a similar stance in the March 2 event (although, again, I did contribute to the *khoro*c by providing *mu*ri). It was the first event I attended, however, on February 21, in which I patronised the whole performance. This seemed appropriate, though, considering that I had been the one to initiate it. Member-Sab, Mujib's friend and member of the local *pori*ṣod (council), kindly hosted the event. He informed Mujib afterwards how much I owed him for the *khoro*c. Before the event, Mujib suggested that I give 500 taka to cover performer costs. As I understood it, this amount was to be split between all four *puthi*-readers (125 taka each).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> During my fieldwork in 2005, the exchange rate was approximately 90 taka to the pound.



This did not seem like a particularly large sum of money, but Abdul Lotif said that *puthi*-readers do not necessarily expect to receive payment at all (being aware of the general poverty of most villagers). Boshir Ahmed (one of the *puthi*-readers at the February 21 event), however, was quite clear that while *puthi*-readers should not ask for payment, the person who organises an event *should* give the reader *something*. But even he acknowledged that this is down to an individual giving whatever s/he deems appropriate. The remuneration may be financial, or payment in kind (a bag of rice, for example). What is deemed appropriate is relative to the perceived or stated need of the *puthi*-reader (and, of course, relative to how much an individual can afford to give themselves). Johir Uddin (a *puthi*-reader present at both the February 21 and March 2 events) was more proactive in his approach. He said that every fifteen days, or every month, the *puthi*-readers in his area (and those who 'love *puthis*') collect money from those interested in attending an event in order to give the money to the reader. On the basis that a labourer can earn 200-250 taka a day, Johir Uddin argued that if a *puthi*-reader is given this amount for a night's reading, it enables him to sleep the following day rather than having to work. This remuneration, then, is essentially a compensation for time. There is no suggestion that a *puthi*-reader is better-off financially by reading *puthis*. Although Dunham mentions that some *puthi*-readers are professionals, among the Muslims I met, *puthi-pora* is not practised as a profession.

Contrary to expectations, perhaps, *puthi-pora* can be organised by anyone. It does not require the organisation of a spiritual leader (unlike *Qawwali*, for example). Whether this has always been the case we cannot know, but Ahmed (1988:xxii) seems to indicate that it was more common for those who were able to read to buy *puthis* for their 'own use' (and by extension to be invited to read by those who could not) rather than for the village Mullah to organise regular events, as he only '*Occasionally...read out passages...to those who gathered round him*' (emphasis mine). I do not think this undermines the thesis hypothesis at all. In fact, I think the *deinstitutionalised* nature of the tradition, the ease of its organisation by ordinary people, is one of the reasons why *puthi-pora* would have been such an attractive tradition to the cultural mediators and reformers as a means of propagating their messages. This is the same regarding the level of patronage needed for public events. Expenses for food are inevitably incurred, but these are no different from the general requirements for hospitality, and are not beyond the means of even the poor (particularly if everyone attending contributes a

little). Performers may receive remuneration, but, again, this is not obligatory; it is dependent on individual circumstances.

Coupled with its ordinary setting, having organisational and fiscal freedom no doubt enabled Islam to spread more widely (and deeply) than it would have done were it left to the institutional leaders to do so from the top down (although, of course, they did this too). This was probably quite natural, however, as the cultural mediators (and the reformers after them) were interested in providing alternative material for Bengali Muslims, not an alternative context for its performance or organisation. Contemporary Hindu practice suggests that the organisation of *puthi-pora* today is a continuation of pre-Islamic practice, particularly in the private or small public Hindu contexts. These can be organised by anyone, but larger community events, like certain Hindu festivals (during which specific Hindu books are read), may involve centralised leadership, and certainly greater patronage. But as we shall see below, *puthi-pora* does not mirror the Hindu context in every respect.

### *Times and Seasons*

One factor that significantly impacts the organisational process is timing. As we saw in the previous chapter, this sub-schematic element and its related categories are drawn from, and affected by, the wider Bengali culture. Considering when *puthi-pora* usually takes place involves more than simply discerning the time of day or night of a specific event (this will be discussed in relation to the *Sequence of Events* below); it involves determining whether there is a specific time of year—or season—in which an event is more likely to occur than another, and what external factors there are that may affect these occasions and their frequency. If *puthi-pora* was explicitly linked with the events or ‘programmes’ of mosque or shrine, we may expect it to coincide with their ritually-significant occasions (like the singing of *Qawwali* during the daily *Karka* ritual at the Ajmer Dargah, its weekly *mahphil*, or annual *uros*).<sup>9</sup> From what we have seen above, however, such institutionally-derived occasions seem unlikely. But this does not mean that *puthi-pora* will not coincide with other more generally-significant times in the Islamic calendar. There are other factors, however, unrelated to religion, that have a practical impact.

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<sup>9</sup> The *Karka* ceremony—the closing of the main doors of the shrine—is one of a number of daily rituals performed at the Dargah of Ajmer. *Mahphil* is a special gathering on Thursday nights, arranged in front of the shrine. The *uros* is the death-day celebration of the saint. See Moini (1989:67-8).

The three *puthi-pora* events I attended took place within two and a half weeks of each other, close to the beginning of my time in Sylhet. Although some performers insisted that there is no fixed season for *puthi-pora*, the situation I faced was that the March 9 event was the last public event of which I was both aware and able to attend. I visited a number of other locations during the remainder of my fieldwork, recording individual performers reading from different *puthis* (and interviewing them), but my repeated and frustrated experience was that after March 9, most people were too busy with agricultural work to arrange public events. That this was normal was confirmed during interviews with the *puthi*-readers, many of whom said that *puthis* are not read much during cultivation time (*ksetor somoy*), and that *puthi-pora* would begin again after the harvest.<sup>10</sup> Boshir Ahmed said that *puthi-pora* would begin again during the Bengali months of *Aśin* (mid-September to mid-October) and *Kartik* (mid-October to mid-November). These times are largely cultivation-free, as are *Pous* (mid-December to mid-January) and *Magh* (mid-January to mid-February), two other months referred to as times in which *puthi-pora* is often heard.

In addition to agricultural cultivation, events in the Islamic (or *Hijra*) calendar also have an effect on when *puthi-pora* may or may not take place. During *Ramadan*, for example, Abdul Korim said that *puthi*-readers do not have time to read *puthis* as they, along with the rest of the Muslim community, are occupied by specific religious observances. The entire Qur'an is also recited (*khotom pora*) over the thirty nights of *Ramadan*, one *shipara* (chapter) per night. In contrast, the months of *Mōhorrom* and *Rojob* are said to be times of increased *puthi-pora*. *Mōhorrom* 10 and *Rojob* 27 are particularly significant dates. The former is the Day of *Aśura* which commemorates the martyrdom of Huson (the Prophet Muhammad's grandson) in the battle of Karbala in 680 A.D.; the latter celebrates *Meheraj*, the Prophet's reputed journey from Masjid al-Aqsa to the heavens. These stories are related in *Jongo Nama* and *Halotun Nobi* respectively, and both *puthis* are said to be read particularly during their respective months (*Halotun Nobi* in *Rojob*, and *Jongo Nama* in *Mōhorrom*).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As most of my interviews were conducted in August, the *puthi*-readers must have been referring to the *aus* harvest, and the transplanting of *sail* (or 'transplanted *amon*'). See Rizvi, ed. (1970:126-30) for details of the different rice crops in Sylhet.

<sup>11</sup> When I attended the February 21 event, I did not know that this date, according to the *Hijra* calendar, was *Mōhorrom* 11. Abdul Lotif, the first *puthi*-reader of the night, chose to read from *Jongo Nama* he said because it was the 'moon' of *Mōhorrom*.

However, this is not a complete picture. *Puthi-pora* events may be more or less likely to occur during the specific times mentioned above, but some performers claimed that *puthi-pora* takes place at any frequency from every day to almost never: every two or three days, twice-weekly, weekly, fortnightly, and monthly. This will depend both on whether the context is public or private and on the level of interest. Abdul Lotif, for instance, said that he reads every day, between thirty minutes to an hour. Here, he was clearly referring to a private context, as there was no public event planned at the time of his interview and he was also generally pessimistic about the frequency of public events. Like Abdul Lotif, Abdul Korim said that he reads *puthis* most days of the week, sometimes every day. Again, this appears to be in a private rather than a public context as he also had no public event planned at the time of his interview. But he was much less pessimistic about the present frequency of public events, asserting that they take place 'all the time'. Others made similar claims. Badsha Miah and Siraj Uddin, for example, both claimed to receive daily invitations to read. When asked, both said that they had been to an event the day before their interviews, and had one planned for the following day. Badsha Miah said that he had one arranged that same day.

These conflicting claims for the frequency of public *puthi-pora* events raise a couple of questions: Why do some performers claim higher frequency than others? And what explains the potential contradiction between daily events and the time of cultivation? The level of interest is an answer to the first. Interest in *puthi-pora* will vary from place to place, a point Johir Uddin made quite clearly. In one location, one reader may receive two invitations a week; in another place, another reader may not receive a single invitation in a fortnight or a month. Invitations will also depend upon how well a reader is known (or their popularity). With regard to the second question, although a number of *puthi*-readers said that *puthi-pora* does not totally cease, they did acknowledge that *puthis* are read less (perhaps just an hour or two, and usually no later than 10pm), and that fewer people attend.

While agricultural and religious factors have some impact on when *puthi-pora* takes place, they are not the ultimate determiners of its performance occasions. The former (as far as it affects those involved in agricultural cultivation), affects Hindus as well as Muslims, but religious factors affect the Hindu occasions more. *Halotun Nobi* is read during *Rojob*, and *Jongo Nama* during *Mohorrom*, but these *puthis* are not

read exclusively at these times, nor are they read as worship. Worship is probably the greatest functional difference between *puthi-pora*—as a Muslim expression—and its Hindu counterparts and predecessors. *Padmo-Puran*, for instance, while it can be (and is) read throughout the year, must be read during the months of *Śrabon* (mid-July to mid-August) and *Bhadro* (mid-August to mid-September) as an act of worship (*pūja*) to the snake goddess, *Monosa*, by her devotees. This may have more of a parallel in the performance of certain esoteric *puthis* (if they are linked with the anniversaries of the *pīr* whose teachings they contain), but not in the reading of the popular narrative *puthis* like the two mentioned above. The latter appear typically non-ritualistic; even the days of the events I attended (Monday and Wednesday) are not significant days in Islamic belief.<sup>12</sup> Of course, *puthi-pora* today takes place after the reform movements. There may have been a greater alignment of religious performance times in the early stages of Islamisation (a reinterpretation of pre-Islamic festivals and events, perhaps), but this is not so today. This is one area in which *puthi-pora* appears to have evolved whilst maintaining the more flexible contexts for frequent performance.

### *Objects and Spaces*

Because the meta-categories of object and space impact setting (see Figure 3.1), the assumption made at the beginning of the section—that one may expect the immediate performance setting to be shaped by the ritually-significant objects and spaces of a mosque or a shrine—is not sustainable. But, even in an ordinary setting like a *bari*, spaces are made and occupied by the participants (performers and audience) and these can be affected incidentally or deliberately by certain physical objects (significant or otherwise). Even when *Qawwali* takes place somewhere other than at the tomb of a saint, for instance, there are a layout plan and seating arrangements for participants based on proximity to a spiritual leader and determined by status. There is sometimes a separate enclosure provided for women, as well as young boys, who are ‘excluded because of the temptation which their presence constitutes’ (Qureshi 1995:111). The purpose here is to consider whether there is any such pattern in *puthi-pora* events. We

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<sup>12</sup> Thursday and Friday are significant days in Islam. The former is the day of remembering the dead; the latter, the day of weekly prayer. *Qawwali* typically takes place on these days, as it does on other ritually-determined days associated with a saint’s anniversaries. See Qureshi (1995:110).

will begin by looking at spaces—first, public and private spaces; second, performance and audience spaces.

In the March 9 event, the demarcation line between public and private spaces was drawn at the kitchen doors. Men stayed in the main room and women remained (largely invisible) in the kitchen. *Pīr* Ali, as host and head of the household, was the only man to access the private space. This he did periodically to check on the progress of the food preparations, and, when the food was ready, to bring it out and serve it to the participants. This demarcation was also evident in the other two events, although due to the rustic construction of their *baris*, a curtain marked the access point between these two spaces and an internal bamboo divider marked the physical boundary. I did not see any women in the February 21 event, but they were quite probably behind the curtain preparing food.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, I saw a number of women during the March 2 event, gathering periodically at the edge of the drawn-back curtain. But it was not just women; I also saw men and children appear, disappear, and reappear from this private space. Interviews with the *puthi*-readers confirmed this general segregation of men and women, and an implicit understanding of public and private spaces. Abdul Korim, for example, said that women do not sit with men but sit in a different room to listen. Referring to the internal bamboo dividing wall, Johir Uddin spoke of women listening from the ‘other side’.<sup>14</sup> I noted in the March 9 event that ‘*The women were listening... through the kitchen doors while they were preparing dinner.*’ And, in the March 2 event, I observed ‘*women and children looking through the gap between the wall and the bamboo divider at the front of the room.*’ While the women have certain catering responsibilities during events (from making tea to preparing dinner), the *bari* provides a natural context for them to be able to hear what is read without abrogating cultural rules of gender segregation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Member-*sab*, our host on that occasion, brought out all the food from this point.

<sup>14</sup> If it is a big event, Johir Uddin said, there could be as many as 20 and 25 women on the other side of the wall. With some pride, he recalled a past event in which he was reading where so many women had gathered on the other side of the bamboo partition and were pressing against it to hear who was reading ‘so beautifully’ that it gave way and all the women spilled into the room! In a somewhat contradictory statement, however, he claimed to receive invitations from some women to read at their *bari* in which they read together (*barit daōt dilailō koyek jone miliya amra*), implying together in the same room.

<sup>15</sup> These examples were all observed in a bounded setting, inside one of *bari* rooms. In *Maṭir Moyna*, however, where the *puthi-poṛa* performance takes place in an unbounded setting, outside, in the *bari* courtyard, an audience of men and women are seen together. Even here, though, the men and women sit in two separate groups. This is common also in public *jarīgan* performances (see Dunham 1997:56).

Performer and audience spaces were not as clearly demarcated. There were no physical or spatial boundaries separating the performers and audience;<sup>16</sup> they both sat together, the audience sitting around the *puthi*-readers. This was described as *beriya boiya* (to sit surrounding or encircling), and *boro gul bandhiya boiya* (to sit making a big circle).<sup>17</sup> The latter is represented in Figure 3.3. In all three events, older audience members tended to sit closest to the *puthi*-readers and the younger members furthest away. This may have been just a coincidence of timing (the older men arrived first), or an indication of their interest. But it is more probable that the seniority that is attached to old-age gives them this right. As Qureshi (1995:111) observes in regard to *Qawwali* audiences, status is attributed to the old on account of 'potential spirituality'; the young lack this status on account of their 'assumed worldliness'. Sitting close to the performers in *Qawwali* assemblies, however, is not equated with privilege. In fact, Qureshi (1995:114) states that 'the seating order does not facilitate the listeners' focus on the performers' at all. This, however, just 'reflects the purpose of the assembly—to promote for the listeners an inner concentration on the mystical quest, with the help of the *Qawwali as a medium only*' (emphasis mine).

The organisation of space in *Qawwali* assemblies, then, is related to function (the function of *puthi-pora* is quite different from *Qawwali*, as we shall see below). If an assembly is held at a shrine, the privileged spaces are next to the tomb of the saint; where an assembly is held elsewhere, the privileged spaces are next to the '*gaddi*', the 'throne', or sitting place of the spiritual leader. But as we have seen above, *puthi-pora* requires no spiritual leader. *Pir* Ali may have been the *khadim* of the local shrine, but he had no special status in the event. In fact, as host he spent most of his time looking after and serving his guests. In the absence of such a leader, the *puthi*-reader does not fulfil this role. He or she may be the focus of the event because they are reading, but they do not preside over it (as we shall see later). Sitting near the reader, then, would appear to have no other significance than being the 'best seats', and these would be open first to the older audience members.

<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to *puthi-pora* as represented in *Matir Moyna*. Here, the *puthi*-reader seems to be sitting on a low dais in front of, and separate from, the audience, behind a small lectern on which the *puthi* is placed. It may be that this kind of spatial demarcation is more typical of a larger-scale event, or an event that takes place in an unbounded setting.

<sup>17</sup> Dunham (1997:330) also notes this encircling of a performer by the audience: 'The reader or reciter renders a text while seated surrounded by his or her listeners.'

Figure 3.3: February 21 performance setting, Member-sab's bari. Photograph by Angela Kane.



Apart from this, there are no special seating arrangements. Spaces occupied by the performers and audience in the bounded setting of a *bari* room are created by the physical dimensions of that room, the spaces available, and the physical objects which occupy those spaces. Given the option, participants choose to sit on the floor on mats, and spread out from where the performers are seated. When the spaces on the mats are gone, audience members will sit wherever else there is space (on chairs, benches, or a bed). Inasmuch as the *bari* is the typical setting for *puthi-pora*, those physical objects which are part of the *bari* are a part of that setting and are, therefore, equally typical. But none of them is indispensable to the tradition. This applies to the *lem* (lamp). Is it typical? Yes. Is it indispensable? No; unless there is no other light source. While the *lem* may well be iconic (as we saw in chapter 2), it merely fulfils a practical function. Apart from the *puthi*, no other object is indispensable.

In the light of all that we have seen in relation to performance arrangements so far, it should not be surprising to learn that there are no ritually-significant objects or spaces in a *puthi-pora* event. This contrasts with the reading of the Hindu literature. Putting aside the specific performance occasions for now (such as *Monosa-* or *Durga-*



*Pūja*), even the frequent and ordinary times for reading occur in a house's idol room, in front of the idols, which is located on the eastern or northern side of the *bari*.<sup>18</sup> This signifies again, that whatever other function their reading has, Hindus read their books as worship. This was obvious during one event I attended, when incense was brought into the room where the reading was taking place, a room full of poster-size pictures of Hindu deities. This is another area in which *puthi-pora* has (of necessity) evolved in becoming a Muslim tradition, and for which there is no 'mainstream' parallel.

In summary, what is striking about the context for *puthi-pora* performance today—as considered in relation to performance arrangements—is its ordinariness. *Puthi-pora* is not organised to fulfil a ritual purpose for a ritual occasion. It, therefore, requires no ritual location, and no institutionally-derived oversight. Rather, *puthi-pora* events are organised by ordinary people. Patronage is needed as there are expenses incurred, but these are not beyond the ordinary means of even the poorest community members. Events take place in ordinary settings, whenever people have the time and the interest to organise them. They are only affected by external factors such as the agricultural seasons and pan-Islamic festivals. None of these features of the tradition (as observed in the present) conflict with the hypothesis—that *puthi-pora* was used as a means of spreading Islam in the past. As I have repeatedly attempted to show, *puthi-pora* was effective as a vehicle for Islamisation precisely *because* of its ordinariness. But these things were not innovation. The cultural mediators adopted and adapted the traditions that were already prevalent in Bengali society at the time; in so doing, they performed a masterstroke.

## Participation in *Puthi-Pora*

The Muslim Bengali literature, both acculturated and pan-Islamic, was composed with the same purpose in mind—to instruct the ill-grounded Bengali Muslim masses. Their audience were those who professed faith, individuals and communities who remained immersed in Hindu mythology and legend.<sup>19</sup> Reaching the people meant reaching into their households, 'to wean Muslims away from *mangal*-literature by creating for them

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<sup>18</sup> Apparently every idol room in every Hindu house is positioned this way. According to my contacts, this was so that when the sun rises they would be able to wake up and worship it there.

<sup>19</sup> This was the reality the cultural mediators faced in the sixteenth century, but the reformers may have felt that in practice not much had changed by the eighteenth century.

in Bengali an Islamic [literary] substitute' (Roy 1983:88),<sup>20</sup> not creating a new context for performance. This, as we saw in the previous section, is exactly what they did. But who took on the responsibility for reading these 'new' *puthis*? And how many readers were needed to stage an event? These questions will be considered under the first two headings, *Occupation, Age and Gender* and *Participant Numbers*. They will also be discussed as they relate to audiences. The third heading, *Motivation and Function*, in seeking to determine the purpose of *puthi-pora* as it is understood today, arguably provides the most explicit link with the thesis hypothesis. How functional 'ideals' are applied in performance is considered under the final three headings—*Explanation and Correction, Performance Aesthetics* and *Involvement and Interaction*. These headings have been derived from the schematic diagram in Figure 3.4.

### *Occupation, Age and Gender*

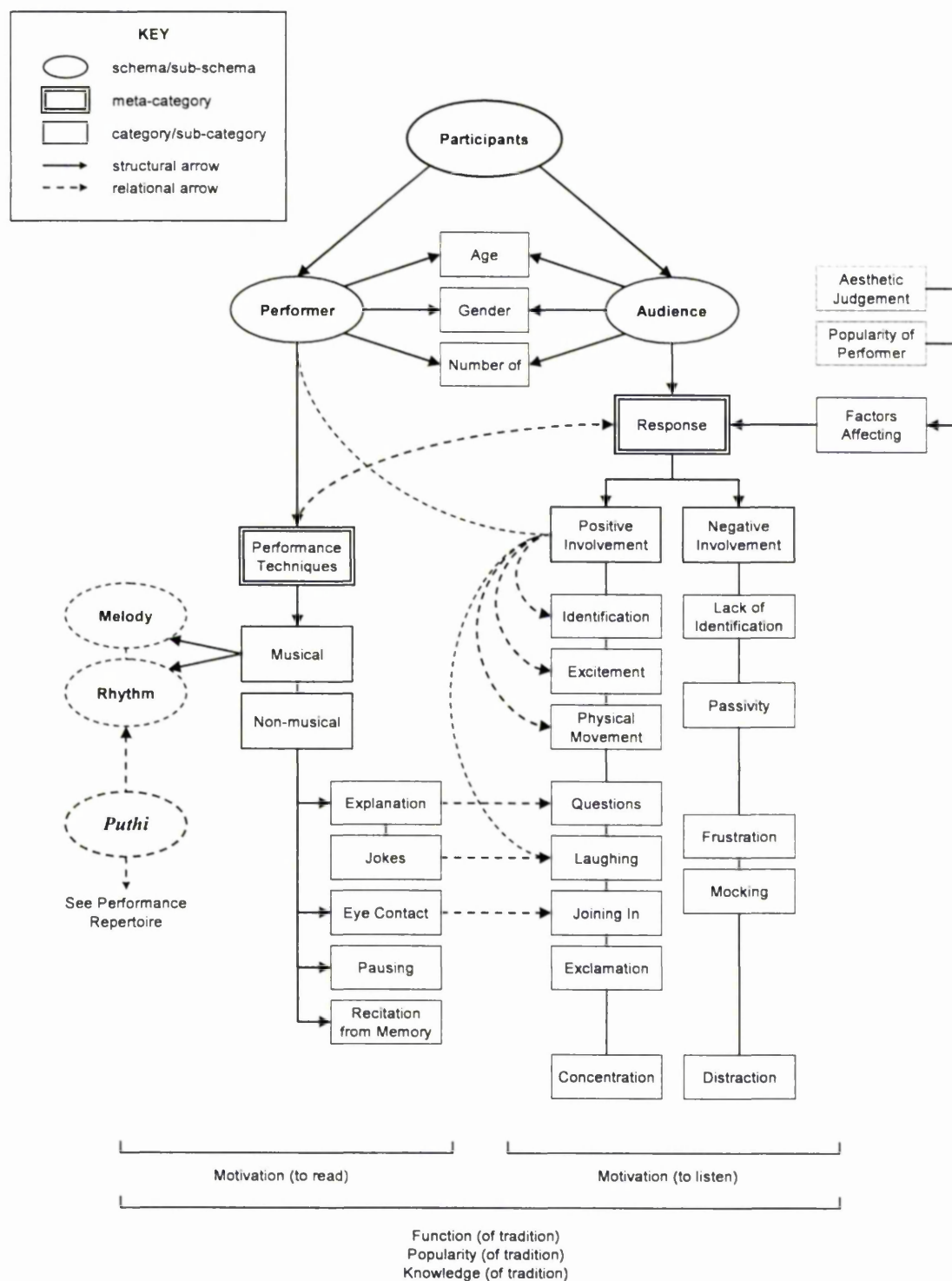
We do not know for certain who the first *puthi*-readers were: whether they were the Bengali poets who composed the literature, or the religious gentry, or others. If village Mullahs engaged in *puthi-pora* during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this may indicate a continuation of past practice, but as they only did so 'occasionally' they were probably not the most typical readers, particularly as 'many rural Muslims', those 'who knew the rudiments of the language, [also] bought [*puthis*]...for their own use' (Ahmed 1988:xxii). We can speculate, then, that those who could read, and had a desire (or motivation) to do so, did read; and that those who could not read, but had a desire (or motivation) to hear, invited those who could read to read for them (and for others). This is consistent with the situation today. As we saw in the previous section, *puthi*-readers are not professionals—they do not make a living from *puthi-pora*. Most are employed as day-labourers, working in agricultural cultivation. They are ordinary members of their communities, men and women without specific musical training, or any special spiritual status.

Regarding age, I assumed that *puthi*-readers I would meet would be the relics of a now moribund tradition. Others held similar views, particularly of those who read Sylheti-Nagri—that only the older generation still know it. In reality, the majority of the older generation of *puthi*-readers (those who read *puthis* in the past) either did not

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<sup>20</sup> And later, we could say that the reformers attempted to 'wean Muslims away' from the syncretistic literature by creating for them a more 'orthodox' substitute.

Figure 3.4: Schematic Diagram Representing Participant Involvement and Interaction



read any more or were not able to (often due to poor sight). The majority of practising *puthi*-readers I met (of both Bengali and Sylheti-Nagri script *puthis*) were men aged between 40 and 60. These were men with experience; many of them had been reading

for over 20 years. I was, therefore, surprised and encouraged when Nazrul introduced me to two *puthi*-readers from the Golabgonj area—Montazil Ali, in his late twenties, and Dilara Begum, in her early thirties (Figures 3.5 and 3.6)—who were both able to read Sylheti-Nagri and Bengali script *puthis*. This disproved that Sylheti-Nagri is the domain of the older generation only, even if it is more typical.

I was also surprised to find a large age-range among audience members. There were three or four generations present at all three of the events I attended, from young children to old men. Considering that these events took place at a *bari*, however, this is quite understandable (and, according to the *puthi*-readers, also typical). Audience demographics did change over the course of each event, though. Children, who were often present at the beginning, gradually disappeared; younger men generally came in late. The mainstay of the audience, however, those who stayed from beginning to end, was middle-aged and older men. Although there was no age discrimination in terms of who was permitted to attend, the performers did make a distinction between young and old on the basis of their repertory preferences. Young people are more interested in ‘love stories’ I was told, whereas the old prefer ‘Islamic’ *puthis* (*puthis* which have an explicitly Islamic theme). This confirms a point made in the previous section—that the young are assumed to be ‘worldly’ and that the old are assumed to be ‘spiritual’. According to one reader, although children do attend *puthi-pora* events, they are not able to understand the true meaning of the *puthis*.

The majority of the *puthi*-readers I met were men. For obvious reasons, it was not easy for me to observe women reading *puthis*, but I had repeatedly heard Sylhetis, both in Sylhet Town and London, when recalling childhood memories of *puthi-pora*, refer to a female family member (a mother, grandmother, or aunt) reading *puthis* in their *bari*. Were it not for Nazrul’s family connections, I would not have been able to observe this side of the tradition at all.<sup>21</sup> I was frequently told that women do not read in front of men because it is shameful (*loijsa*) for them to do so; so only women and children gather to listen to female *puthi*-readers.<sup>22</sup> While I cannot say much about the

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<sup>21</sup> Mujib knew of women who could read *puthis* in his area, but lacked a direct connection. Despite his efforts, it proved impossible to arrange an event for us to observe (even when we suggested that my wife go instead of me).

<sup>22</sup> This does not seem to apply to close family members, and, as a result of my relationship with Nazrul, I was treated ‘like family’ which proffered me a unique opportunity to observe this side of the tradition which would otherwise not have been open to me. However, my exposure and perspective is obviously limited. A comprehensive study of female *puthi*-readers would require a female researcher.

*Figure 3.5: Montazil Ali (left) with his father Mojor Ali (right). Photograph by David Kane.*



*Figure 3.6: Dilara Begum (second in from the left), February 28, 2005. Photograph by David Kane.*



female context, the two occasions on which I observed and recorded Dilara Begum read (February 28 and July 24) may be as typical as any. In the interview following her reading on February 28, she said that women gather to listen 'like this' (Figure 3.6).<sup>23</sup> This occasion was quite spontaneous, however, particularly compared to July 24, which had been prearranged. It was interesting to note that, having had some time to prepare for our visit on this occasion, Dilara Begum chose to sit on a mat on the floor in the same way as the men did in other events I observed (Figure 3.7).<sup>24</sup> Most often, however, she said that she reads by herself in her *bari*.

It was interesting to hear the views that male *puthi*-readers had of their female counterparts. I was told that, if women read *puthis* at all today—and some denied that they did—they are either 'old' or 'old-fashioned'. They also said that women do not read 'well', meaning that they do not read 'melodically' (with tunes), or that they read *puthis* just like they would read any other book. From my limited exposure, this was not true. All the women I met did read 'melodically', although, admittedly, not with the same amount of musical accomplishment as the male readers. It is important to remember that because of their domestic responsibilities, women do not have as much free time as men to read. But there may be another reason (one that will be discussed further below); female readers may be more concerned with how well the content of a *puthi* is understood, rather than how well a *puthi* is read. This emphasis on content perhaps explains why Siraj Uddin said that women are able to understand 'every kind of *puthi*'—because they 'think about the story' (unlike children). Like the old, women are said to favour the 'religious' *puthis*.

In the gender-stratified society of Bangladesh, the fact that *puthis* are read by men and women is extremely significant. It means that *puthi-pora* has permeated both strata. Women can and do attend male-dominated events as we have seen (by listening from private spaces), but they are able to participate much more fully in the confines of their own homes. And, while all ages can (and do) attend public *puthi-pora* events, children (in particular) are more accepted in all-female gatherings, and there receive greater exposure to the tradition (it is surely no coincidence that those with childhood

<sup>23</sup> She actually says '*koyjon...boin*' ('a few sisters') which indicates women with whom she is familiar. On this particular occasion, the women and children gathered in Figure 3.6 are neighbours.

<sup>24</sup> The location was the same as the previous occasion, however, as was the audience (the women and children of the *bari*), although this time some female relatives from the USA attended for a while. Even so, both occasions were during the day and individuals came and went according to either their interest and/or responsibilities.



Figure 3.7: Dilara Begum with Nazrul observing, July 24, 2005. Photograph by David Kane.



memories of *puthi-pora* remember the reading of a female family member). A single tradition, one utilised by ordinary community members—by both genders according to their own needs and contexts—is a tradition with the potential to reach the whole of society. This is why *puthi-pora* was such a powerful vehicle for Islamisation. But it was nothing new. The Hindu ‘stories and fictions’ were propagated in this way, by ordinary Hindus, both men and women reading in ‘every household’ (and at that time, no doubt, by newly-professing Muslims as well). This is reflected in the contemporary scene. Many ordinary Hindus, men and women with neither priestly nor professional status, continue to read *mongol-kabyo* literature in their homes today. If Islam was to reach its new converts, not only did the *mangal*-literature need to be replaced with an ‘Islamic substitute’, not only did the ordinariness of the setting need to be maintained, but its personnel needed to come from the same stock—ordinary men and women.

### *Participant Numbers*

But how many performers are required for *puthi-pora*? Going back to the three events I attended, there were four readers in the March 9 event. Each read in turn for about

an hour. At the February 21 event there were three *puthi*-readers; at the March 2 event there were two. Again, each read in turn one after the other, although in both of these events there was some alternation between them. But were these events typical? I was not so sure. The February 21 event was a rescheduling of an event that was initially planned for February 8. On that occasion the *puthi*-reader fell ill and was unable to come. Clearly embarrassed, Mujib and Member-Sab (host) promised to arrange three *puthi*-readers next time, so that even if one reader did not come there would still be two more! This is obviously what they did. During the March 9 event, too, I wondered if the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*-readers would have been invited if they had not known that we were planning to attend.

When asked, none of the performers gave the impression that any one of these events was atypical regarding the number of readers. In fact, Boshir Ahmed indicated that the February 21 event was typical (regardless of the reasons given for inviting the three readers). Johir Uddin was helpfully more explicit. He said that when going to an event, one reader will take another one or two readers along with him as ‘one person’s voice’ (*ekjonor golay*) is unable to last a whole night. This suggests that the host does not always invite; sometimes one performer invites another. When the one gets tired the other can continue while the first rests, smokes a cigarette, or eats some *pan*. This ‘sharing of the reading’ was confirmed by Abdul Korim, and both he and Johir Uddin spoke of it in the context of reading a single *puthi*—maintaining the continuity of repertoire in other words.<sup>25</sup> Montazil Ali did not refer to repertory continuity directly, but implied that if other readers are present they will read. His personal experience is reading by himself, however, as there is nobody else to read with.

It seems that having more than one *puthi*-reader to read at a *puthi-pora* event is typical, then, for at least two practical reasons—to mitigate tiredness and to enable continuous reading. Is it necessary? In spite of the practicalities, I think this would be hard to maintain, not to mention Montazil Ali’s claims for singular reading. Although there is interaction between performers (as we shall see below), it is not antiphonal—alternation, when it happens, is dictated by choice (the choice of a tiring performer or the will of a critical audience). If *puthi-pora* does not require more than one reader for appropriate performance, the organisation of an event can be quite straightforward.

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<sup>25</sup> This appears to be at odds with my observations during the March 9 event, where each *puthi*-reader (apart from Abdul Korim and Abdul Lotif) read from a different *puthi*. This will be discussed below in the final section under the heading *Choices and Constraints*.



But, if there is more than one reader, there is just greater potential for an event to last longer and for the reading of a *puthi* to be maintained without a break. Significantly, these observations were mirrored in the Hindu context. Although parts of the *Padmo-Puraṇ* narrative can be read antiphonally (in contrast to many of the Islamic narrative *puthis*),<sup>26</sup> it can equally be read by one performer (and is probably read in this context more often). The idea of ‘sharing the reading’ because of tiredness was also expressed by the Hindu readers I interviewed.

Audience numbers ebbed and flowed throughout the course of each event. At the commencement of the March 9 event, the initial number of 21 people increased to around 40 before dropping to 35 by the end. It was a similar pattern in the February 21 event—beginning with 14 people, increasing to 32, dropping to 24. The March 2 event saw a slight variation. This event started with 16 people and increased to around 50, but the numbers did not drop before the end.<sup>27</sup> The average across all three events was 30. Similar to the answers given regarding performance frequency, I was given a range of numerical extremes by the *puthi*-readers, from 5 people attending an event to 500! In the context of the Horipur gathering, Siraj Uddin said 10-20 people met every day to listen to *puthi-pora*. The majority of *puthi*-readers suggested that an audience of 20-40 is typical. These numbers are consistent with my own experience and are no different in the Hindu context.

### *Motivation and Function*

At the end of the March 9 event, I asked our host, *Pīr* Ali, why it had been organised. His response—that they had organised it for us—was not what I was expecting, but it did raise a few key questions. We have already considered how *puthi-pora* events are arranged, but why are they? What motivates an individual or group to organise an event? What motivates an audience to gather to listen? What motivates a performer to read? Governing motivation is function, as I attempted to show in Figure 3.4, and it is function (or at least perceived function) which will affect participants’ expectations of

<sup>26</sup> This, of course, is determined by genre. In the performance of *Padmo-Puraṇ*, antiphony (between a leading singer and co-singers) is typical in its fullest context. In *Jarīgan*, this same kind of antiphony is also common, as it is in the singing of *jarīgan* songs from the *puthi Jonga Nama*, but only here, not in any of the *pojar* or *tripodī* sections (although as we shall see below, sometimes the audience joins in by ‘singing’ the end of the rhymed poetic lines with the reader, most likely at his direction).

<sup>27</sup> There was a point, very close to the end of the event, where some of the audience members were getting up to leave but were persuaded to sit back down again by Monu Miah who followed by singing a final song.

what is, and what is not, appropriate involvement and interaction. Aspects of the latter have their observable categories (as we shall see below), but I want, firstly, to look at function from the performers' perspective, as this will provide a conceptual context for considering these other categories.

The *puthi*-readers I interviewed gave various and nuanced answers regarding the tradition's function. Two emerged most prominently, however, entertainment and learning. For some, *puthi-poṛa* is seen as a way to pass the time, as something to do—to gather a few people together and to have fun (*phurti*); for others, it is viewed as a means of acquiring wisdom or knowledge (*jñān*). These two ideas are not necessarily opposed, but there is a danger of polarising them. Part of the difficulty is linguistic. A word like *phurti*, for instance, has a broad semantic range. It can mean 'amusement', 'merriment' and 'fun', or simply, 'a good time', all of which imply entertainment. But it can also mean 'joy' and 'delight' which is obviously more emotive (Ali et al. 1999: 490).<sup>28</sup> Boshir Ahmed uses *phurti* in this latter sense to express the kind of emotional 'connection' an individual may have when listening to *puthi-poṛa*: 'If sorrow [*duḥkh*] comes, we feel sorrow; if joy [*phurti*] comes, we feel joy.' This kind of 'connection', or involvement, will depend, in part, on the content of the *puthi*-text; but the choice of *puthi*-text may also expose the motivations of those arranging an event.

Generally, however, the consensus among performers was that there is benefit to gain from *puthi-poṛa*—that it will do them and their hearers good. Siraj Uddin, for example, said that those who come and listen to *puthi-poṛa* will 'become good' (*bhala oitora*), that they 'develop' spiritually (*ogrosor oitora*) as a direct result. He was not suggesting that the act of reading or hearing in itself can impute any kind of benefit; his comments were qualified on the basis of content. By listening to *puthi-poṛa*, he affirmed, Muslims can learn the Hadith (*hadis*),<sup>29</sup> and, from this authoritative ground, they can learn how they should live—in particular, learning which things are lawful or permissive (*halal*) and which things are not (*haram*)—thereby obeying the

<sup>28</sup> *Anondo* was another word used in respect to function which can be variously defined: '1 joy; delight; cheerfulness... 2 happiness; contentment. 3 pleasure; satisfaction; gratification; propitiation; gladness. 4 merriment; amusement; hilarity; joviality...' (Ali et al. 1999: 50). *Moja* and *sokhe* were also used in general reference to entertainment.

<sup>29</sup> Substantial textual analysis would have to be done in order to confirm which *puthis* are based upon which Hadiths, an area way beyond the scope of this thesis. My interest here, however, is not whether this is true or not, but with its perception. For, if Siraj Uddin and others believe that certain *puthis* (or the *puthi*-literature in general) are based upon the Hadiths, this will affect their view of the tradition, its authority, and its function.

Hadith and avoiding profligate living.<sup>30</sup> Others added, similarly, that through *puthi-pora* people can learn how to pray, learn how to obey Allah, learn of the lives of the Prophets (the Prophet Mohammad in particular), learn aspects of Islamic law (*śorīyot*), and how to be protected from doing wrong. These specific benefits (*labh*) of *puthi-pora* help make sense of some of the more general comments offered by *puthi*-readers regarding function, such as *puthi-pora* is about ‘learning the history’ or ‘gaining wisdom and increasing in knowledge’; and ‘there are many necessary things [*dorkarī jinis*] in the *puthis*’ or ‘all *puthis* are related with Islam’.

Although *puthi-pora* can benefit a reader in these ways, regardless of whether the context is public or private, it can only benefit others if the text is read aloud. This is obvious, but it is significant that many performers expressed a personal sense of obligation to do so. Nurunnessa Begum, for example, asked: ‘Is it acceptable to read alone? If people hear, they will be able to follow an order or a wish; the soul can be purified [*dil pobitro*], the soul can be softened [*dil norom*].’ Boshir Ahmed, similarly compelled, stated: ‘It’s important to know the history...isn’t it? If I know but you don’t, it’s important for me to tell you.’ Abdul Korim, too, said that it is through *puthi-pora* that ‘We can learn the Islamic Laws, and convey them to those who don’t know them... We can express our knowledge of the Hadith and inform people of Allah’s orders.’ Siraj Uddin said: ‘If I quarrel with you, I sin. If I read a *puthi*, it is virtuous [*soōyab*]<sup>31</sup>. If ten people learn a lesson from listening, it is a great virtue. Both listener and reader receive the blessing [*neki*].’ Johir Uddin gives a specific example: ‘I read *puthis* to lots of people, *Halotun Nobi* for instance. There are certain people who don’t pray. After hearing [this] *puthi*, they will start to pray.’ Spiritual benefits, then, come by hearing.

But hearing is not enough; understanding is also necessary. This, again, seems obvious, but Abdul Lotif stressed the point: ‘If you can understand [the words] then it’s valuable, otherwise it’s not.’<sup>32</sup> Montazil Ali, too, emphasised that ‘We can receive benefits *if* we understand.’ Similarly, Johir Uddin stated that ‘those who understand will obey [*puthis* like the Hadith]...those who lack insight [*bhabuk cara*] won’t...’ It

<sup>30</sup> Siraj Uddin asks: ‘Suppose Allah says “Don’t go this way. Don’t take a bribe. Don’t take interest [on a loan]. Don’t harm others.” If I don’t do these things, I’ll benefit [*ekṭa labh oilō*], won’t I?’

<sup>31</sup> Arabic: ‘sowab’.

<sup>32</sup> Abdul Lotif quoted some specific words from a *puthi* to make the point. The emphasis here is on the value of these words to the hearer. There is no doubt in Abdul Lotif’s mind that they are valuable. Just prior to this comment, he had said that a *puthi*’s value cannot be measured (*ujon*, literally, weighed).

is clear, just from these comments, that understanding on the part of the hearer is not assumed. As we saw above, understanding is a quality particularly associated with the old, but there are also suggestions that it is an attitude or state of mind. Boshir Ahmed put it rather enigmatically: 'If someone has understanding, he will understand.' Johir Uddin brings us back to the idea of motivation when he says that 'some will listen to [*puthi-pora*] to learn [*hikar lagi*]; others will listen for fun [*sukhe*].' Abdul Korim made a similar statement,<sup>33</sup> but goes on to contrast those who find pleasure (*anondor laigbo*) purely in 'beautiful' reading, with those who listen in order to learn from the Hadith. This focus on aesthetics, on *how* a *puthi* is read rather than *what* it is saying, is equated, in Boshir Ahmed's mind, with a lack of understanding:

If people don't have understanding, they will say [things like] your voice isn't good as they don't understand what I'm saying. I might as well be reading to a tree... [If] you don't understand is there any point reading? I read to make them understand.

Boshir Ahmed's motivation to read is clear.<sup>34</sup> In fact, he even challenged the Mullahs (who, by reputation, disapprove of music in any form) saying, 'You seek to enlighten the people through sermons [*oya*]; we're doing it through song.' Siraj Uddin went so far as to say that by listening to *puthi-pora*, Muslims can learn the same things as the Mullahs preach in their sermons.

So, although an event may be arranged for any number of reasons, and while individuals may attend with varying motivations, the general motivation of the *puthi*-readers appears to be based on a belief that in the *puthi*-text there is something worth communicating, something which needs to be understood. We could say in respect to function, then, that the two key aspects of the tradition are the communication of the *puthi*-text and the facilitation of its understanding (the latter being the principal end). These are entirely consistent with the goals of their authors—cultural mediator and reformer alike—to instruct and illumine the uninformed Muslim masses. Although the overarching purpose of reading the Hindu literature is worship, it is hugely significant that these same aims were claimed, point by point, by the Hindu readers—that while some people come to listen for entertainment, the majority come to learn; a belief that by listening to the reading 'bad' people can become 'good'; a belief that reading and listening can impart 'virtue'; and, most importantly, that the motivation for reading is

<sup>33</sup> 'Some listen for learning [*śikṣar lagi*]; some for pleasure [*anondor lagi*].'

<sup>34</sup> He went on to say that it is difficult for him to maintain the motivation to read if the people attending show no real motivation to listen to, and understand, what he is reading.

to cause people to understand the tenets of their religion. In adopting the narrative and lyrical forms of the pre-Islamic Bengali literature, then, the cultural mediators knew exactly what they were doing.<sup>35</sup> They understood the importance of this literature both in propagating and sustaining the beliefs and values they were keen to replace.

### *Explanation and Correction*

Explanation and correction are two ways in which the key aspects of function find expression in the process of performance. During the March 9 event, both Nazrul and I were surprised by the amount of explanation Siraj Uddin used in communicating the *puthi*-text. Badsha Miah also paused during his reading to explain, but his and Siraj Uddin's reading was in stark contrast both to Abdul Korim's and Abdul Lotif's in this regard, and to what I had observed in previous events of male readers in general. Why was this? Perhaps the recording made them feel self-conscious. An incident occurred during the recording of Dilara Begum's reading that raised this possibility:<sup>36</sup>

*At one stage, after about 20 minutes of recording, she stopped to ask whether she could explain what she was reading. I think she was concerned about messing up the recording by speaking (I had [asked] Nazrul to ask her at the very beginning whether she would mind if we put these recordings in the British Library). Such was her concern that we wouldn't understand if she didn't explain, it would seem, that she couldn't go on with [a] straight unexplained reading [of the text].*

As noted above, the other occasion on which I recorded Dilara Begum read was more spontaneous and she offered a lot of explanation as she read.<sup>37</sup> This occasion had been prearranged, however, and in order to document the event fully, I used a video camera and DAT recorder, as well as the MP3 recorder I used on the first occasion. Perhaps it was not until she could bear the incongruity of reading for reading's sake any longer, that she asked if she could explain the meaning of what she was reading *to us*—outsiders, who surely had no way of understanding what she was reading unless she explained it! As I later recalled, I found this 'very significant.'

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<sup>35</sup> I am singling out the cultural mediators especially because they were the first authors of the Muslim Bengali literature. The reformers continued to use these same essential forms because they were clearly effective in communicating a message (which they were as keen to replace as their predecessors were to replace the Hindu ones).

<sup>36</sup> Fieldnotes: July 25, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> On this occasion (February 28, 2005), I had gone to record Nazrul's aunt read, but Dilara Begum, her neighbour, happened to be there and began to correct Nazrul's aunt's reading. She said that she could also read this *puthi* (*Nobijir Halot*, a Bengali translation of the Sylheti-Nagri, *Halotun Nobi*), and after a while took over. As I recalled in my fieldnotes (March 1, 2005): '*She started from a section she liked and again, like the old lady [the lady from Kanishail, Neharunnessa Khatun, that Nazrul sees as the 'typical' puthi-reader], explained certain portions in the middle of reading.*'

Perhaps this was how some of the other (male) *puthi*-readers felt, that they had to give a 'straight' and 'polished' recitation *because* it was being recorded. During the February 21 event I noted a couple of occasions in which audience members were told to be quiet. If this was expressed in the light of the event being recorded, the *puthi*-readers may well have decided to keep explanation to a minimum (although they did make some verbal interjections). But recording cannot have had everything to do with it, for Siraj Uddin and Badsha Miah were subject to the same conditions.

My interviews with the *puthi*-readers raised two responses to this whole issue of explanation. While some saw it as their responsibility to explain what they read, others would explain only if they were asked. The former could be termed 'proactive' explanation, the latter 'reactive'. Siraj Uddin, on the one hand, said that 'If I only read [but do not explain], one person may understand but another may not. The other person needs to understand it too.' Perhaps surprisingly, Abdul Korim also asked: 'If you don't explain, then what have you read? Not everybody is able to understand, so I have to explain it to them.' Montazil Ali, on the other hand, said: 'If someone doesn't understand the reading and asks for an explanation then an explanation will be given.' Likewise, Johir Uddin said: 'When we [the *puthi*-readers] sit together we don't need to explain the meaning of the *puthis* to each other, but somebody from the audience may suddenly ask about it' so then 'we have to explain it.' This 'reactive' approach perhaps allows more opportunity for audience interaction as it places the onus on the audience to ask questions if they are unable to understand.<sup>38</sup> But whether 'proactive' or 'reactive', all the *puthi*-readers agreed that understanding is essential. This was no different with the Hindu readers. They also stressed the importance of understanding, and explanation was a prominent feature of their performances that I observed (again, in the same circumstances, some readers just explained more than others).

Correction is a performer-performer interaction. As suggested in chapter 1, the correction of one reader to another reader's reading is possibly the best indication of how well the corrector is familiar with, or has 'memorised' a *puthi*-text. Although it was not stated in my March 9 fieldnote account, there was an instance where Abdul Korim corrected Abdul Lotif's misreading of a word or two in a section in *Mohobbot*

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<sup>38</sup> Every now and then, even these readers would throw out rhetorical questions such as '*bujrai ni?*' ('Are you understanding?'). If any aspect of the narrative was not clear, it would give the audience an opportunity to ask for clarification.

*Nama*.<sup>39</sup> Abdul Korim's reading was not appreciated, but this action demonstrated that he knew the *puthi*-text. His motivation in correcting Abdul Lotif may have been to prove this point to regain some crushed pride, but correcting others in performance is something Abdul Korim said he did regularly. He was not alone in doing so. In the other two *puthi-pora* events I attended, Abdul Lotif was active in correcting others. During Boshir Ahmed's reading of *Halotun Nobi* (in the February 21 event), Abdul Lotif corrected him on a number of occasions. He became increasingly frustrated with Boshir Ahmed to the point that he took the *puthi* away from him and started to read it himself! He did the same thing to Johir Uddin during this same event, and again in the March 2 event. Boshir Ahmed and Johir Uddin both interpreted Abdul Lotif's actions (in taking these *puthis* away from them) as an act of competition; his attempt to give us the impression that he was the 'best' reader. This kind of competition could equally apply to his and others' motivation in correcting other *puthi*-readers; a way to display superior knowledge to the audience.

Where there is more than one performer, some competition is inevitable; but it is not necessarily the only motivation for correcting a mistake in reading. The first of two key aspects of the tradition's function considered above was communication—the communication of a *puthi*-text. Unlike *jarigan*, where the *boyati* composes his texts in the process of performance, *puthi*-texts are fixed, written and contained in printed and manuscript form. Does this mean, as Dunham would lead us to believe, that the *puthi*-reader, therefore, requires less skill than the *jarigan boyati*, because he reads and does not compose? This may be so if their roles are understood in performance terms only. But if the written *puthi*-texts represent a deliberate textual fixity—a desire on the part of the authors to safeguard their message—this kind of comparison misses the point. From my observations and cursory analysis,<sup>40</sup> the *puthi*-readers very rarely deviated from the written *puthi*-text; if they did, as noted in chapter 1, this divergence appeared to be a mistake rather than intentional variation. The only instances in the narrative *puthis* (of which I am aware), in which there was variation apart from a

<sup>39</sup> RTO ('Real-Time Observations', referred to in chapter 2), DAT014: 0.28.30.

<sup>40</sup> I had the whole of the February 21 event transcribed, as did I the *puthi-pora* of Nurunnessa Begum, Neharunnessa Khatun, Dilara Begum, and Montazil Ali (recorded on a field trip on February 28, 2005). I compared the transcriptions of the *puthi-pora* of all the readers on both of these occasions with typed versions of *Jongo Nama*, *Mohobbot Nama*, and *Halotun Nobi* (courtesy of STAR, Sylheti Translation and Research). The level of correlation between the written and performed texts was overwhelmingly strong. It persuaded me that this was both 'normal' and important.

continuous reading of the text, were in the *jarī* songs of *Jongo Nama*. Even here, the variation was repetition of previous lines rather than added material. Communicating the *puthi*-text *as it is written*, then, is normal practice.<sup>41</sup> Whatever the motivation, one performer's correcting of another performer keeps each one accountable to accurate reading, and, consequently, to a faithful communication of the text.

### *Performance Aesthetics*

One might assume that if a *puthi* is communicated accurately and it is explained when any part is unclear that everyone would be satisfied; for if people attend *puthi-pora* events to learn, what else would matter? As mentioned above, however, not everyone does attend for this reason, and the vilification of Abdul Korim in the March 9 event demonstrated clearly that how a *puthi* is read *does* matter, at least to some. Although Boshir Ahmed equated a focus on aesthetic reading with a lack of understanding, he also recognised that if he does not read well, then nobody will want to listen. Abdul Lotif was more specific. He said that 'tunes are used to make people interested' and that there would be no interest in *puthi-pora* if the texts were read without them. Some of these tunes are analysed and compared in chapter 5, but for now it is important to grasp that a 'good' reading is understood synonymously with a musical reading. Even if individuals attend *puthi-pora* events to be entertained, to pass the time, and to enjoy the performance—even if this betrays their lack of knowledge and understanding—they are nevertheless in a situation where they will be exposed to a *puthi's* content. The onus lies with the reader, whose motivation is to communicate and facilitate understanding, to read 'well' so as not to miss the opportunity.

It is unlikely that a performer's motivations are always this altruistic though. All the readers agreed that some read better than others, but it is down to the audience to decide who is best. 'If you don't like my reading', Boshir Ahmed said, 'you can stop me. ...If I read well, you can tell me to continue.' Because the audience did not enjoy Abdul Korim's reading, they wanted him to stop and someone else to take over. When I wanted Abdul Lotif to stop, because the audience were enjoying his reading my will was overruled. And, although Abdul Lotif justified taking the *puthi* away

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<sup>41</sup> Lloyd-Williams (personal communication, 10/09/2007), however, has heard at least one *puthi-pora* performance where the reader used modern verb endings in place of the archaic ones in the text that he judged would not be understood today (e.g., '*koritam*' in place of '*koritu*' ['I would do], and '*korilam*' in place of '*korilu*' [I did], as well as other odd words).



from Boshir Ahmed during the February 21 event on account of the latter's 'bad' reading (in his opinion), it was because this was not initiated by the audience that he and Johir Uddin were so upset. If an audience can exercise the power of veto, reading 'well' is the only way to maintain the stage (so to speak). This is how performer-popularity is built. The more popular a reader, the more invitations he receives. More invitations mean more performances, and, therefore, more opportunities to obtain recognition and status. For those who attend an event but who are not asked to read, their only means of swaying audience favour, is to comment on the performer who is reading (which is a possible context for correction, as noted above).

Some of the male performers had a high view of their own ability. Abdul Lotif, for example, said that the other readers from around Fotehpur and Horipur are reluctant to read in front of him (because of his assumed status). Siraj Uddin said that Badsha Miah will not read in front of him, in deference to him as his teacher. He said that he occasionally allows Badsha Miah to read when he gets tired, but Badsha Miah does not do so without consent.<sup>42</sup> Johir Uddin, too, boasted that he could produce the best tunes for reading Bengali *puthis*, and that when a *puthi-pora* event is arranged, he is the first to be invited. He also admitted that he, and others, sometimes sit in the bazaar and discuss who the best readers are. All this goes to show that it is not just audience members who are concerned with aesthetics. It did seem to be a particularly male concern, however. I did not have the opportunity to meet and interview the same number of female readers, but there did not appear to be the same self-aggrandisement among the women as there evidently was among the men. This may be due, in part, to the more private context in which women read *puthis* (with their families at home, or with small groups of women). But if their status as a *puthi*-reader does not depend on performance aesthetics, this may be one reason why women are more zealous in their explanations of the *puthi*-text than (most of) the men.

It is important to reiterate that facilitating understanding and the desire to read well are not mutually exclusive. Which of the two receives the greater priority among *puthi*-readers and audience members will inevitably vary, but music is nevertheless an integral part of the communicative power of the vehicle. Without tunes, Abdul Lotif said, nobody would be interested in listening; a point confirmed by the Hindu readers. This is not surprising. Before the introduction of Bengali prose in the early nineteenth

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<sup>42</sup> Badsha Miah, however, did not acknowledge Siraj Uddin as his teacher.

century, verse was the sole literary medium, and verse was rendered ‘musically’ (with or without instrumental accompaniment, depending on the genre of the text). This was the situation the cultural mediators faced in the sixteenth century. Adopting the forms of pre-Islamic literature naturally involved adopting their tunes as well. While Bengali prose is well-established today, and countless Islamic books are available in this form, they are only accessible to a literate, educated few. From its inception, prose was the domain of ‘more literate Bengalis’ (Roy 2001:10). Little has changed for the Bengali Muslim majority. Literacy rates in Bangladesh remain low today; one reason, perhaps, why *puthi-pora* has survived until now. It also points to the enduring nature of verse and ‘melodic’ reading.

This reading, however, is not accompanied by musical instruments. This is one area in which Roy’s (1983:87-8) description of *mongol-kabyo* or *pācali* performance, quoted in chapter 1, does not seem to fit with the performance of *puthi-pora* today. A possible reason for this is that the reformers ‘Islamised’ the performance style, just as they had also Islamised the language. Maybe, with increased awareness of the Islamic injunctions against music,<sup>43</sup> the reformers attempted to purge out those elements that seemed too closely associated with Hinduism, by getting rid of the ‘*nācādi* or dance-style’ and the cymbals and drums (or any other musical instruments that may formerly have been used).<sup>44</sup> This I believe is quite plausible, for these elements are not essential to the performance of *mongol-kabyo* or *pācali* either, nor are they essential to *jarīgan*, a genre which better matched them (Dunham 1997:58). It is also possible, however, that Islamic *puthi-pora* has been performed without instruments from the beginning. The injunctions against the use of musical instruments (and the ensuing debate) go back almost to the beginnings of Islam (Shiloah 1995:62-4). Either way, the fact that *puthi-pora* is performed unaccompanied today indicates how the tradition has adapted and evolved to suit the message proclaimed.

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<sup>43</sup> Music in Islam is a controversial issue. The general principal, it seems, is that ‘Islam permits singing under the condition that it not be in any way obscene or harmful to Islamic morals. There is no harm in its being accompanied by music which is not exciting’ (Al-Qaradawi 19--:300). How one interprets what is ‘obscene or harmful’ or ‘not exciting’ inevitably varies. There are some *hadiths* which try and prove that singing and playing musical instruments are not *haram*, but others dispute their reliability.

<sup>44</sup> During the March 2 event, after a couple of hours, some of the performers began singing folk songs. As I commented in my fieldnotes: ‘From out of nowhere a small pair of finger cymbals were produced, a couple of wood blocks and the back of a pan [betel nut] dish to add some musical accompaniment. At one stage a large dhol [double-ended barrel drum] was brought out only to be sent back again by one of the older men.’ Although these items were introduced during the songs and not during the *puthi-pora*, the conservatism of this ‘elder’ held sway and the *dhol* was not used.

### *Involvement and Interaction*

*Puthi-pora* is not characterised by the intense involvement and interaction that can be seen in other Islamic traditions, such as *Qawwali*. Although *puthi-pora* and *Qawwali* both serve 'to convey a text message' (Qureshi 1995:60), their purposes for doing so are quite different. Whereas the principal end (or function) of *Qawwali* is 'to generate spiritual arousal' (Qureshi 1995:60), the principal end (or function) of *puthi-pora*, as we have seen, is to facilitate understanding. These ends are not mutually exclusive, of course, but they do lead the performers to employ different means—or techniques—in their pursuit. A *Qawwal* 'must be able to repeat, amplify, rearrange or even omit any part of the song text in immediate response to the changing requirements of his listeners' (Qureshi 1995:63); a *puthi*-reader must be able to explain what he or she is reading if asked to do so (or if he or she feels that the audience does not understand the text). For a *Qawwal*, this involves a complex manipulation of musical structure; for a *puthi*-reader, a musical hiatus.

By contrasting *puthi-pora* with *Qawwali* here, I am simply trying to illustrate how function (or perceived function) will affect the participant's expectations of what is, and what is not, appropriate involvement and interaction. Of the many non-musical categories relating to the performance techniques available to a *puthi*-reader, we have looked at explanation and correction, which are most explicitly aligned with function. We have also seen from the audience perspective, how aesthetics can affect a positive or negative response. 'Bad' reading will most likely receive a negative response—at best (though certainly not desirable), passivity, distraction and a lack of identification; at worst, frustration, which may lead to active mocking. And, of course, a 'bad' reader is not a popular reader! Self-preservation requires a 'good', or at least an 'acceptable', reading. If the *puthi*-reader is not just concerned with his reputation as a reader, but is motivated to communicate the message of a *puthi*, and to facilitate its understanding, then it is crucial that he engages his audience. This engagement, or positive response in involvement, may find an audience expression in ways which are antonymic of the features of a negative response stated above: concentration, identification, excitement, exclamation, and physical movement. These responses are individual, however, and it is not necessarily straightforward to attribute their cause, be it a general response to 'good' reading or a particular response to a specific performer technique.

As far as observable interactions are concerned, reactive explanation (as noted above) is a performer response to an audience initiative, asking a question. The use of jokes in explanation—whether through proactive or reactive generation—received an audience response of laughing. The most obvious performer-audience interaction (the most direct correlation between performance technique and audience response) which, unlike explanation, has no explicit connection to function, was when the *puthi*-readers looked up from their texts, made eye contact with audience members who responded by joining in at the end of the rhymed poetic lines. A ‘good’ reading may be able to prevent a negative response, and, better still, promote those kinds of features of a positive response mentioned above. Yet if a *puthi*-reader can actively encourage his audience to participate in the performance, in response to recognisable cues such as direct eye contact, he knows for certain that his audience is engaged. Exactly how this interaction is managed, whether or not there are more appropriate times for this kind of participation—linked to specific points in the text—is an aspect of interaction that will require further study. It can be noted here, however, that the poetic and melodic structures facilitate audience involvement. Nazrul wrote in his fieldnote account that the *puthi*-verse ‘excited’ him; it prompted him to try to anticipate the final words. As we shall see in chapter 5, the structure of the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, based on their relationship with the poetic structure, helps to generate this anticipation.

There was little in the way of audience response in the Hindu readings. There was explanation, as noted above, but this was largely of the proactive kind; questions were not asked (one of the readers implied that it was his responsibility to explain the text, not the audiences’ to ask questions). The Hindu readers, however, did appear to have a strong sense of which genres allow for participation and which do not. *Kīrton*, for instance (particularly the congregational singing of *son-kīrton*), certainly does. So too does *Padmo-Puraṇ* (which is unsurprising considering the overlap between Roy’s description of *moṅgol-kabýo* [of which *Padmo-Puraṇ* is an expression], and Seal’s of *kīrton* in chapter 1). Having said that, it was not clear to me whether the participation in *Padmo-Puraṇ*, the repetition of lines, was ‘congregational’ or performer-performer only.<sup>45</sup> Either way, the repetition of lines is different from joining-in; the latter is not antiphonal, but synchronous with the main reader. Joining-in was not an obvious part

<sup>45</sup> When there was an opportunity to observe this, at a performance I attended on June 9, 2005, neither happened. The main reader read the text without participation from anyone else. This surprised me, but it does support an earlier point, that *Padmo-Puraṇ* can be read by just one reader.

of the Hindu reading. One could postulate that the reading of Hindu literature does not depend on audience engagement as much as *puthi-pora* does—for the former is an act of worship *in its own right*. Lacking this purpose, *puthi-pora* is *all* about the accurate communication of the text and facilitating its understanding, and it is vital in attaining these goals that the performer's audience remain engaged.

To summarise, the fact that ordinary men and women engage in *puthi-pora* indicates how it was possible for Islam to spread so widely and penetrate so deeply in Bengal—the message of the *puthis* was able to reach all members of the Muslim community, without exception. Lack of stipulation in terms of performer numbers made it easier for events to be organised, and, therefore, for the message to be heard (although as we have seen above, having more than one reader can also further this aim). The function of *puthi-pora* as perceived by the performers today is confirmation of its historical use—the bipartite role of communicating the message enshrined in the *puthi*-text, and facilitating its understanding. These roles are expressed, chiefly, in the explanation of the text and through correction (if necessary) to ensure a faithful and accurate reading. In order to engage the audience, however, which is essential to their both hearing and understanding, the reader must read 'well'. This requires reading 'melodically' and interacting with the audience so as to maintain people's interest and involvement. In all of these ways, apart from the function of worship, *puthi-pora* has shown itself, again, to be an Islamic tradition built on pre-Islamic foundations.

## The Performance Occasion

There is nothing in the secondary literature that outlines the details of the performance occasion for *puthi-pora*. The contributions made by Goswami and Dunham, discussed in chapter 1, focused on defining what *puthi-pora* is (and in the case of the latter, what it is not), rather than how it fits into or defines a performance programme, or sequence of events. Ahmed refers to traditionalist Mullahs who occasionally read *puthis* as part of their programme of Islamisation, but he does not describe what the other parts were or how *puthi-pora* related to them. The most specific reference, just a brief statement, comes from Roy (1983:235), although it refers to the performance of the *puthis* of the syncretistic 'little' tradition and the cult of *pīr*: 'The particular *pir* was offered *shirni*

[*śirni*], and at the conclusion of the song the food offered to the *pir* was shared by the participants.’ We are not told what this song was, although the context suggests that it was a ‘folk ballad’ about the *pīr*—his *puthi* in other words. What is important to note here, however, is that the offering and eating of *śirni* is part of a sequence of events in which the *puthi* is read. As it happens, Nazrul refers to *śirni* in the March 9 event too. This will be discussed under the heading *Order and Sequence*, together with all other aspects of the performance occasion from start to finish. Factors which may affect this occasion, particularly the desires of the participants involved, will be discussed under the heading *Choices and Constraints*. First, though, we begin by looking at *Time and Length*; when *puthi-poṛa* events take place and how long they last. All these headings have been derived from the schematic diagram in Figure 3.8.

### *Time and Length*

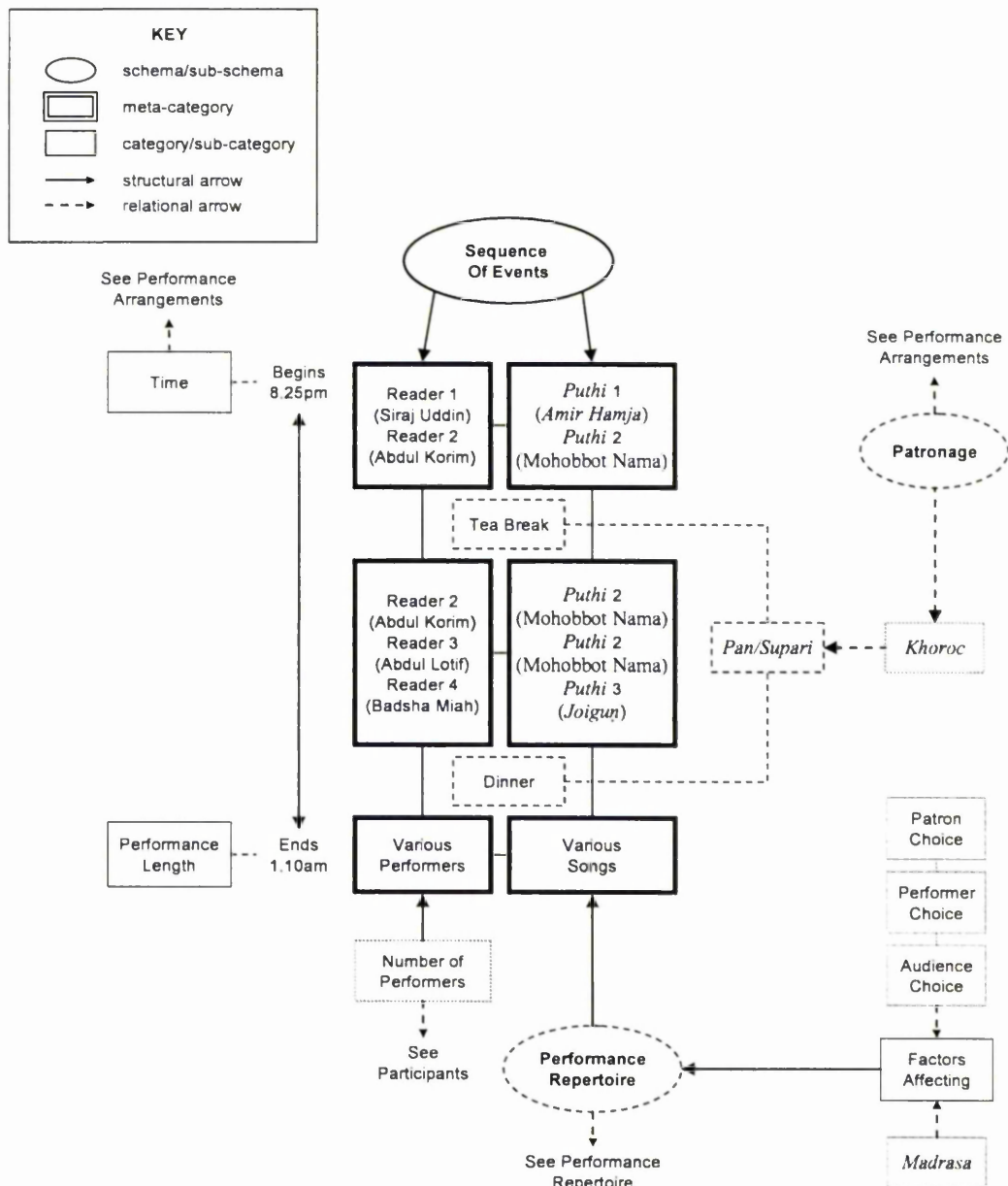
The question, ‘When does *puthi-poṛa* usually take place?’ was discussed in relation to seasons and frequency in the first section. Here, however, we turn to consider its more immediate application in relation to the time of day (or night) of specific events. Just as there are no ritually-determined seasons for *puthi-poṛa*,<sup>46</sup> no special days that *must* be ceremonially observed, there is no prescribed time of day or night either. As with many performance traditions, *puthi-poṛa* typically takes place at night. And like many Muslim traditions, these times are defined in relation to the times of prayer (*namaz*). Badsha Miah made this clear when referring to an event he was planning to attend the day following our interview. He said that this event would begin after *Eśa*, the fifth of the five daily Muslim prayers. This matched my experience. All the *puthi-poṛa* events I attended took place after *Eśa*.

Allied to the question of time is performance length. ‘How long do *puthi-poṛa* events usually last?’ ‘And is there a maximum or minimum length?’ This undoubtedly is affected by the amount of time available between prayer times. The period between *Eśa* and *Phojor*<sup>47</sup> (the first of five daily Muslim prayers), is the longest period of time uninterrupted by any other ritual obligation or labouring responsibility (except during

<sup>46</sup> Although *Halotun Nobi* is said to be read more during *Rojob*, and *Jongo Nama* during *Mōhorrom*, it would be a stretch to call this a ritual requirement. It is simply more appropriate to read these *puthis* during their respective months, but it is no less appropriate to read them during other times too.

<sup>47</sup> Arabic: ‘*fajr*’.

Figure 3.8: Schematic Diagram Representing the Sequence of Events (Wednesday, March 9, 2005)



Ramadan).<sup>48</sup> The March 9 event lasted 4 hours and 45 minutes. This event was the longest I attended, although at 4 hours and 40 minutes the February 21 event was a close second. The March 2 event was almost an hour shorter, lasting 3 hours and 50 minutes. But were any of these typical lengths? This depends on a number of factors, including, as we saw in the first section, the seasons (particularly as they relate to the agricultural calendar). If *puthis* are read at all during times of intense cultivation and

<sup>48</sup> In Sylhet, this amounts to 7 hours 30 minutes at a minimum (between May and June), and 10 hours 30 minutes at the most (between December and January).

harvest, it is usually just for an hour or two (up to 10pm, according to Siraj Uddin). After a harvest or during an agricultural lull, *puthi-pora* may go on until 12 or 1am. Others spoke of *puthi-pora* going on 'all night' during such lulls, which is one reason why performers need to be remunerated, so they can sleep the next day. It is surely no coincidence that the events I attended—which lasted an average of 4 hours each, and ended between 12:10 and 1:10am—occurred during the month of *Phalgun*, before the broadcasting of *auś* and *amon*, and the *bōro* harvest.

Another factor affecting performance length is the number of performers. As noted above, it is difficult for one reader to read for long periods by him/herself, even though some claim to be able to do so. Of course, having more performers increases the potential for a longer event, whether the reading of a single *puthi* is shared or each reads a different *puthi*. If the former—reading a single *puthi*—the length of the *puthi* will also affect the length of the performance. This does not, necessarily, refer to the length of a single *puthi-pora* event, however (although it could do). As Abdul Lotif stated, it is not always possible to finish a *puthi* in one sitting; it may take 1-3 days, or 15-20 days, depending on which *puthi* is read. Badsha Miah confirmed that 'smaller' *puthis* can take 1-3 days to finish and 'larger' *puthis*, like *Amir Hamja* or *Kachachul Ambia*, can take up to six months. Of course, such time-scales are relative. They are dependent on the frequency of the events and on how much of a *puthi* is read on each occasion. Badsha Miah explained that a 'large' *puthi* can take up to six months to complete because the readers have to work, so they can only read 2-5 hours a night, successively, until it is finished. This picture is consistent with the varying demands of the agricultural calendar—reading more during quieter times and less during busy times, but continuing to read nonetheless.

Dusk (*sondhya somoy*) for Hindu readers is a typical time to read, sometimes as part of their time of evening prayer. But while prayer is an indispensable part of the daily routine, reading is not; for they read daily if they have time and not because they must. A choice evening book is the *pācali Kṛṣṇer Oṣṭōttor Śotonam* ('the more than 108 names of Krishna'), because it is short. If a longer book is read, the *Ramayon* for instance, it could take months. This kind of flexibility and choice only relates to the informal contexts for performance (public or private), and has the most parallels with the Islamic context. There is not this kind of liberty during *pūja* times, however (not without risking the deities' wrath, or foregoing their protection or blessing), and these



occasions have their own timetable. *Durga-Pūja*, for example, lasts several days, and in the month of *Śrabon*, as we have already seen, *Padmo-Puraṇ* is read, one narrative section each night throughout the month.

### *Order and Sequence*

However performance length is defined—in terms of the length of a single event or in the sum total of all the events it takes to complete the reading of a single *puthi*—it is only by comparing the single events that we can learn whether there is a schematic pattern in their sequence. If there are repertory obligations, it would not be unusual in the context of South Asian tradition. According to Qureshi (1995:115-6), for instance, the start of a *Qawwali* assembly ‘consists of chanted recitation from various *sūrās* of the Koran’ which, at least include and always conclude ‘with, the relevant Koranic portion for the *fātehā* (*sūrā-e-fātehā*), followed by an intercessory prayer (*du‘ā*). The very end of the assembly is marked with a similar prayer.’ The sequence of songs that falls within this Qur’anic framework is constrained further by traditions specific to the saintly lineage<sup>49</sup> and by thematic conventions which are common to Islamic tradition generally. These begin with songs in praise of Allah and the Prophet Mohammad and follow, in the *Qawwali* occasion itself, with the praise of the saints. Invocatory songs, or *bondonas*, to Allah and Mohammad, to the singer’s *guru*-teacher, and sometimes even to Hindu deities, are typical of the start of the first session of an all-night *jarīgan* programme,<sup>50</sup> as they find their precedent in many Hindu performances.

The diagram in Figure 3.8 represents the sequence of events I witnessed at the March 9 event—three units of performance, divided into two columns (performer and repertoire), punctuated by tea- and dinner-breaks. Each of the four *puthi*-readers read one after the other for about an hour, each reading a different *puthi* except for Abdul Korim and Abdul Lotif who both read from *Mohobbot Nama*. There was no Qur’anic recitation, nor were there *bondonas*,<sup>51</sup> apart from the briefest verbal introductions, of

<sup>49</sup> In Chishti tradition, for example, it is obligatory to either begin or end an assembly with the singing of at least one hymn, the *Qaul* (Qureshi 1995:116).

<sup>50</sup> See Dunham 1997:59-64.

<sup>51</sup> As with traditional Urdu books (Qureshi 1995:117) and with pre-modern Bengali works in general, Lloyd-Williams (2001:4) asserts that ‘Every [Sylheti-Nagri] work is introduced by a ‘bondona’... Whilst in Hindu literature the ‘bondona’ is addressed to the gods and goddesses, the Muslim version addresses praise to Allah and, usually, the ‘panjoton’ (‘group of five’), the five holy people in the Prophet’s family (Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein).’ If these pages are not missing from the *puthi* (and many of them are), the *bondona* may be read at the beginning of an event if the *puthi*-

themselves and of the *puthis* they were going to read (made at my request), none of the *puthi*-readers performed anything other than the texts that were in front of them. That was until after dinner, when Abdul Lotif, Monu Miah, and Badsha Miah sang a few songs and our host played his own choices from a cassette. Apart from this latter anomaly, it was the same general sequence of events as those observed in the previous two—*puthi-pora* followed by at least one concluding song.<sup>52</sup> In all three events more than one *puthi* was read and there were at least two different readers. But does general comparability constitute a pattern, and can such a pattern be described as schematic? Further, are any aspects of the event sequence obligatory?

Before considering the repertory, let us look again at the purpose of the food—both tea- and dinner-breaks. Under the heading *Organisation and Patronage* above, food was discussed in the context of *khoro*c (or expenses), and was understood to be a part of the cultural requirements for hospitality. Nazrul's mention of *sinni* (or *śirni*) in reference to the 'meal' (the dinner-break) in the March 9 event, however, may suggest that it was more than that. *Śirni* in the *Bangla Academy Bengali-English Dictionary* is defined (Ali et al. 1999:754): 'sweetmeat; sweet dish prepared by boiling rice in milk with sugar etc.', but in the *Samsad Student's Bengali-English Dictionary*, it is given a more contextual definition (Ghosh et al. 2002:569): 'an oblation of sweets offered to deities'. The latter fits Roy's description of the use of *śirni* in the performance of the *puthis* of the syncretistic 'little' tradition and the cult of *pīr*, an acculturation of Hindu practice.<sup>53</sup> Nazrul's own definition of *śirni*, however, was simply a meal that is eaten, traditionally, on 'religious occasions'. There was no indication that this food had been offered as an oblation; even if it had been (I may not have known), it was not a part of the performance event sequence. In addition, the food in none of the three events was eaten at the conclusion of the performance, as it is in Roy's description or, again, as it

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reader begins his reading from the beginning of the *puthi*. The only time this could have happened in my experience was during Abdul Korim's reading of *Mohobbot Nama* in the March 9 event. Although Abdul Korim was not the first reader of the night, he began his 'turn' by reading from the beginning of a complete copy of the *puthi*. Nevertheless, he bypassed the *bondona* and began his reading from the first narrative *po*yar. This suggests that while the *bondona* may be a textual convention in the *puthi*-literature, it cannot be considered an obligatory part of the performance.

<sup>52</sup> Although the February 21 event ended with a song (unlike the other two events), the majority of the songs came in the middle of the performance.

<sup>53</sup> The Hindu readers mentioned sharing food (*prosad*) together after a public time of worship (*prosad*, by definition in both dictionaries, is food offered to an idol). This I witnessed both during a weekly worship service at the Zinda Bazar Aśrom (Vaishnava temple) in Sylhet Town, and at a performance of *Padmo-Puraṇ* in Rajnagar, Moulvibazar. The food was served at the conclusion of each event.

is in Hindu practice. In the context of the performance of the popular *puthi*, then, the food fulfils a social rather than a ritual function.

As for the repertory, having more than one reader is fairly typical (although not essential), as discussed above, but this was understood to be a practical solution to fatigue—enabling the continuous reading of a single *puthi* and, therefore, continuity of repertoire. While Abdul Korim and Abdul Lotif ‘shared’ the reading of *Mohobbot Nama* in the March 9 event, this was because of the disfavour of the audience towards Abdul Korim, not because he was tired (although he had made several excuses about having a ‘bad’ throat). In the March 2 event, Abdul Lotif read *Choyphul Mulluk* in alternation with Johir Uddin, but this, again, was probably not due to fatigue either.<sup>54</sup> Continuity of repertoire was maintained in both of these cases, but only for a time. In general, a change of *puthi*-reader led to a change in the repertoire. Unless each change was made in order to complement what had gone before (which appeared unlikely), a change of *puthi*, or a change from a *puthi* to a song, led to repertory discontinuity. If each event is viewed as a discrete unit, then, there is little to suggest cohesion in any of the repertory choices.

This does not seem to sit squarely with the expressed function of the tradition. What is an audience supposed to learn from a miscellany of *puthi*-sections and songs? Surely, a lack of repertory continuity would lead to confusion and not understanding. I put these questions to the *puthi*-readers whose responses were divided. Abdul Lotif, on the one hand, was clear that mixing-up *puthi*-stories during an event *would* leave an audience confused; a sentiment shared by Johir Uddin. Abdul Korim and Boshir Ahmed, on the other hand, were just as clear that reading more than one *puthi* during an event, one *puthi* after another, *would not* lead to confusion. Significantly, they all agreed that reading from just one *puthi* is best. This was expressed both as individual preference and as normal practice. Johir Uddin was most explicit. He stated that ‘The rule is one *puthi* (*niyom oilō ekṭa puthi*)’, although he did not say who created the rule. It was a similar situation with the songs. Some said that songs are sung at *puthi-pora* events, others said that they are not, or at least not normally.

The picture of *puthi-pora* painted by the *puthi*-readers, then, remains one of repertory continuity, despite my observations to the contrary. It is consistent with the

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<sup>54</sup> If the February 21 event is any measure, Abdul Lotif was probably seeking to dominate again.

expressed function of the tradition—learning and understanding, and with the stated purpose of arranging an event—inviting a *puthi*-reader to read a specific *puthi* (or a part of a specific *puthi*), however many nights it may take. If this was the norm, why did it not match my experience?

### *Choices and Constraints*

Badsha Miah's answer was frank: 'We read according to your desire (*apnarar cahida motō amra ita porī*).'<sup>55</sup> I was clear in my own mind that I had not arranged the March 9 event, but the performers (and *Pīr* Ali, as we have already seen) obviously perceived my presence differently. I first became suspicious of this when Abdul Korim replaced Siraj Uddin to read 'After an hour...'. As noted in my fieldnotes, I wondered whether the decision to change reader at this point was the decision of the event organisers, or whether it was 'BECAUSE OF THEIR PERCEPTION THAT WE WANTED A NEW *BOYATI* AFTER [every] HOUR (IN LINE WITH THE FIRST PROGRAMME) OR BECAUSE NAZRUL SUGGESTED IT?' Nazrul did in fact suggest that Siraj Uddin stop,<sup>55</sup> but the perception of the *puthi*-readers was not altogether wrong. While neither Nazrul nor I influenced Abdul Korim in his decision to hand *Mohobbot Nama* over to Abdul Lotif,<sup>56</sup> I interrupted Abdul Lotif, just 15 minutes later, to change tapes. During this practical hiatus, because '*I had seen another puthi floating around, I asked what [it] was...*' Why? Because I was '*hoping to record something new (a new Sylheti-Nagri puthi)*' and, as I admitted in my 'out-of-the-field, analytical voice', this was 'my preoccupation.'

This incident explains why my observations of *puthi-pōra* did not correspond with the picture painted by the *puthi*-readers. Here was repertory continuity in action, Abdul Lotif continuing to read from where Abdul Korim had left off, but '*because we had already heard an hour of reading from... [Mohobbot Nama]*', I was ready for a change. I had heard Abdul Lotif read from this *puthi* at the previous two events, and I wanted to record something (and perhaps someone) else. Here, my desire to observe a 'normal' event, was conflicting with my desire to record as many examples of *puthis* and *puthi*-readers as possible (Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* in particular), and the latter was dominating. As it happened, the audience '*seemed to want Abdul Lotif to carry on*

<sup>55</sup> RTO, DAT013: 0.51.50: 'Nazrul suggests to SU [Siraj Uddin] that he stop. SU wants to continue reading until the end of the page.'

<sup>56</sup> If anything we influenced him reading as long as he did, despite the negative audience reaction.

*reading...and so he did*', but this was no thanks to me.<sup>57</sup> Both of these little episodes, however—Siraj Uddin making way for Abdul Korim, and Abdul Lotif continuing his reading—give us an insight into Badsha Miah's statement above: '*We* read according to *your* desire' (emphasis mine).

In all of the events I attended there were potentially competing desires—mine, the host/organiser's, the *puthi*-readers', and the audience's. How are these competing desires handled? Whose desire takes precedence if there is conflict? While the *puthi*-reader's preference may be to read just one *puthi*, the general consensus is that they will read whatever they are asked to read. This decision is often made beforehand, as we have seen above, by the person organising the event. This person will decide what *puthi* they want to hear (hence the purpose for the event) and invite a particular reader to read that specific *puthi*. If the reader is asked to bring more than one *puthi* he will, but this will inevitably lead to disagreements over which *puthi* (or *puthis*) should be read—the context in which most audience members express their repertory desires. Boshir Ahmed attempts to deal with these situations by telling his audiences to decide between themselves. If there is no agreement he may have to read from all of them in order to keep the peace! Siraj Uddin suggested that the oldest person decides; Badsha Miah implied that he is swayed by a desire to satisfy the majority.

In the light of these comments, the events I attended were not wholly unusual. Given their perception of me as patron, and my desire to record as many examples of *puthis* and *puthi*-readers as possible, I was treated to a show of four *puthi*-readers and three *puthis* at the March 9 event, including the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi Mohobbot Nama*, in spite of the desires of the audience. Yet during the same event, by popular demand, Abdul Lotif continued his reading from this *puthi* even though I would have preferred a change. It was a similar situation at the February 21 event. Here I made my desires more clearly known; expecting there to be four Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* and four *puthi*-readers, I agreed with Mujib that each reader would get an hour to read. But even then my choices were not always upheld, and audience pressure dictated on occasions. The occasion with the least number of *puthis* (two) and *puthi*-readers (two) was the March 2 event, the event with which I had the least involvement.

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<sup>57</sup> My language ability was also not at the level where I could meaningfully engage with the texts in the way that the *puthi*-readers, audience, and even Nazrul could. This may explain my arbitrary decision to switch *puthi* and *puthi*-reader every hour, as it conveniently coincided with a mini DV tape change.

It was the same with the songs. I did not request them at any of the events, but they occurred nonetheless. Who initiated them—patron, performer, or audience—I do not know. According to Abdul Lotif, it is the right of the patron or organiser to make that choice, and, if he does, the *puthi*-reader will stop reading and sing a song. Abdul Korim suggested more of a free-for-all; that if anyone wants to sing a song they can, although he did not say who would qualify. What he did make explicit, however, was that songs are neither typical nor required at *puthi-pora* events (a point made by other readers), which again raises the question of why they occurred in every event. When he was asked, Abdul Korim said that the songs were not sung because we were there, but to give the *puthi*-readers a break from reading. In his fieldnotes from the March 2 event, Nazrul offers a different interpretation: ‘As the night got going, so the moods [sic] of the people [changed]; they wanted some short and quick excitement, and this gave way to [their] singing songs.’ This clearly indicates that it was the audience who influenced the singing of songs, on this occasion at least. Although the songs at these events may not have been sung *for* us especially, as more people had attended to see the *sada manuṣ* (the ‘white person’), as Mujib had explained, there were more people present—people who may not have been particularly interested in the *puthi*-reading in itself—to exercise an opinion as to what should be performed. In short, *because* we were there so too were others who would probably not have been there normally, and, therefore, the context was ripe for a greater range of repertory desires.

The Hindu readers spoke of choice, too, but it was more in the context of there being a predetermined programme; choices made before the event takes place, and the reader’s being instructed what to read at each stage.<sup>58</sup> There was little or no audience preference expressed in any of the occasions I observed, and a much clearer sense of progression in the performance. Every performance was different, however, as were their sequences of events, so it is impossible to generalise (food was not served at the conclusion of all of these occasions, for example, nor was a *guru-bondona* always sung at the beginning). The *puthi-pora* events, in contrast, were remarkably similar—essentially, readers taking it in turn to read a *puthi* or sing an occasional song. The repertoire of these occasions, too, and the order and sequence of their events, whether

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<sup>58</sup> As it happens, at one event I facilitated I was constantly asked what I would like to hear next. I did not appreciate at the time that my request for them to read ‘what they would normally read’ would not have been a normal request in that context!

they were planned beforehand or decided upon during the performance, did not seem to be governed by anything other than choice.

In summary, *puthi-pora* occasions typically take place at night, after the final Muslim call to prayer. There is no fixed length to the events, but length is affected by factors like the agricultural seasons and the number of readers available. In general, a *puthi-pora* event will consist of the reading of one *puthi*, or a particular section from it, and, depending on the desires of the audience or those organising it, other *puthi*-sections or songs. If desired, specific *puthis* can be read over a number of consecutive nights, the number depending on the length of the *puthi* and the amount of time devoted to its reading each night. There is no set pattern, however, no specific sequence of events, or repertory obligations, like there are in *Qawwali* assemblies or in certain Hindu performance contexts. What is read (or sung) is determined by choice and choice alone. This lack of ritual requirement and flexibility in performance is just another feature that makes *puthi-pora* a powerful means of communication, but it is a feature that has most likely adapted over the centuries and in the wake of the reformist wave in particular. This is why, today, having a motivation to read (on the part of the performer) and a motivation to listen (on the part of an audience) is important for the longevity of the tradition, for there is no higher constraint.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

This chapter has considered the context of *puthi-pora* by looking at the details of how performances are arranged, who participates in them, and what a typical performance occasion consists of in terms of its specific events. Studying the details of the March 9 event, its categories and schemas, comparing them with other events and with the data from interviews, has led to the drawing of a generalised picture of the tradition (albeit still in sketchy form). We see an ‘ordinary’ tradition—a tradition not dependant on the Islamic institutions for its setting, times, leadership, or performance occasions. It is a tradition propagated and sustained by the motivated; not priests or professionals, but ordinary men and women who see value in the *puthis*, who seek to communicate their message and to facilitate their understanding. Far from undermining the hypothesis—that *puthi-pora* was used as a vehicle for Islamisation in Bengal—because of this lack of connectivity with mosque or shrine, everything we have seen so far has confirmed

it. The cultural mediators, in the first stage of Islamisation, facilitated the composition of substitute literature for the Bengali Muslim masses; they did not create a substitute performance context. This is indicated by the brief consideration of contemporaneous Hindu parallel traditions. Yet the parallels only go so far; which is itself an indication that while the context for performance was not replaced, it was, nevertheless, adapted, in order that it might be consistent with the content of the message proclaimed.

Considering the context for *puthi-pora* performance is, I believe, one part of a process in demystifying Abecassis' (1990:9) mystery: that 'The precise way in which [Islam] spread in Bengal, and the reasons for its rapid and widespread acceptance, are [not really] shrouded in...mystery' but were due to the foresight and commitment of the cultural mediators in adopting a vehicle for communication whose performance context was already so much a part of the lives of the Bengali Muslim masses. If these men were able to 'tap into' this context, they would be able to reach their audience. It seems that this is exactly what they did, as did the reformers after them (although with a much changed message and adapted performance-style). In the next chapter, we will step back from the specific context of performance and take a closer look at the *puthi-literature*. This will add another layer to our understanding of the power of *puthi-pora* as a vehicle for Islamisation, a fuller appreciation of the 'precise way in which [Islam] spread in Bengal' and one more part to the process of demystifying 'the reasons for its rapid and widespread acceptance'.

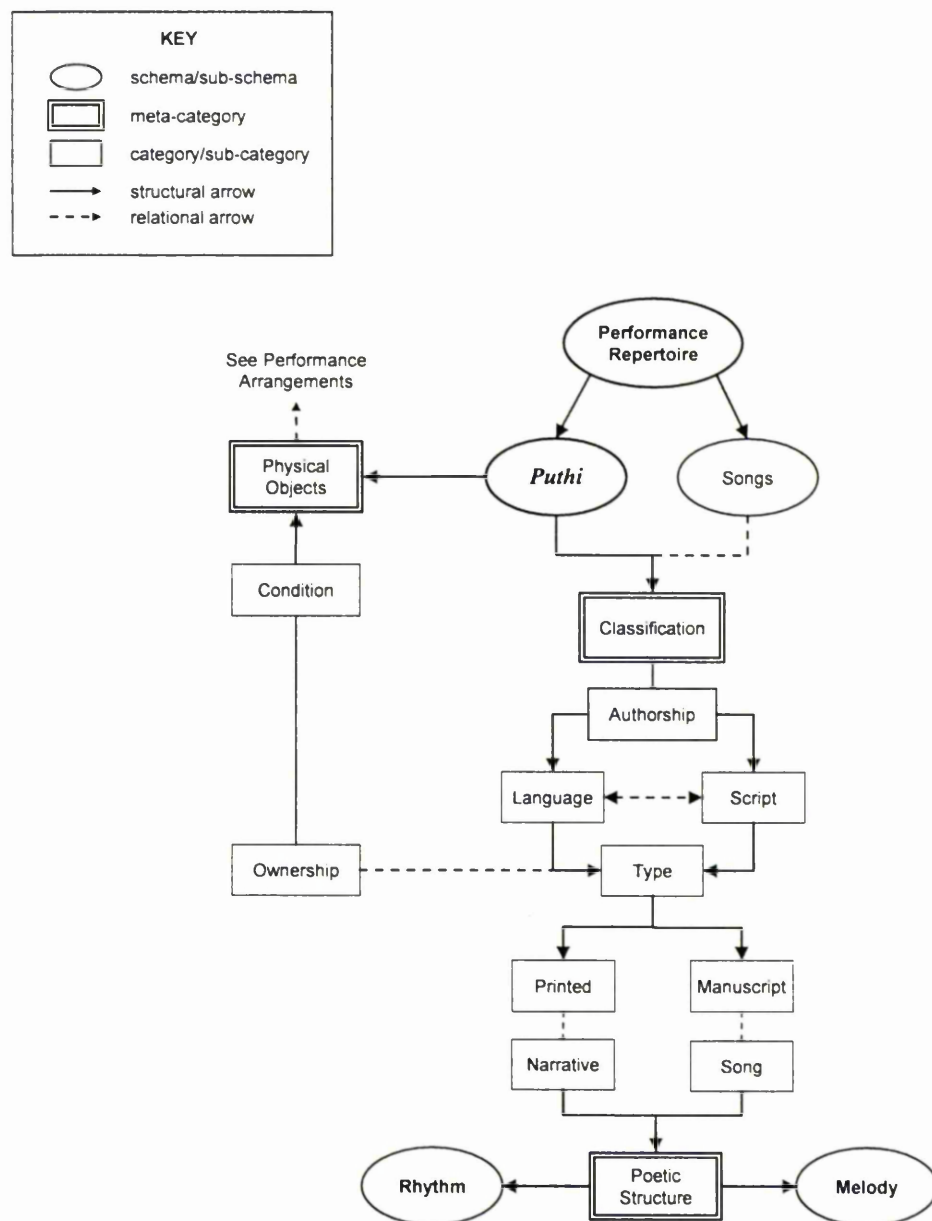


## Considering Content: A Closer Look at the *Puthi*-Literature

| It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature.  
Henry James, 1843-1916.

In this chapter we consider the fourth and final thematic group and schematic diagram created in chapter 2: the *Performance Repertoire* (Figure 4.1); or, more precisely, the ‘*puthi-pora* repertoire’. There are four main sections, each one focusing on an aspect relating to the *puthi* itself—the content of the repertoire. The first looks at the *puthi* as a physical object; how *puthis* are viewed (and used) by their readers. This relates to the authority of the tradition, implicit or perceived, and their consideration will add a further dimension to our understanding of the function of the *puthi*-literature, and of how *puthis* should be viewed in relation to the Qur’an, the Hadith and other literature. The subsequent sections—*Language and Script*, *Authorship and Type*, and *Structure and Form*—all relate in some way to the meta-category, classification. *Language and Script* is a broad level classification. This will look, in particular, at the origins of the Sylheti-Nagri script, to see if there is any justification for making distinctions between the Sylheti-Nagri and Bengali traditions of *puthi-pora* on a basis *other than* language and script. *Authorship and Type* looks at two *puthi*-types, ‘mainstream’ and ‘esoteric’, a division of the *puthi*-literature based on general availability, content and authorship, and on whether they exist in printed or manuscript form. In the final section, *Structure and Form*, I will attempt to show that there is also a general connection between these two *puthi*-types and their composition which is significant in defining what the *puthi-pora* repertoire consists of, or determining what content is emically defined as ‘read’. In turn, this will lead to a consideration of the poetic metres used in one *puthi*-type in particular which will lay the foundation for an analysis of the tunes used to read them in the following chapter.

Figure 4.1: Schematic Diagram Representing Performance Repertoire



### Puthi as Object

The majority of *puthi*-readers agreed that *puthis* are not like ordinary books (*boi*), but the reasons they gave were based on relative rather than absolute criteria. Abdul Lotif, for example, stated that *puthis* should be shown ‘respect’ (*somman*) because they are full of ‘mystery’ or ‘hidden significance’ (*marmoto*), full of ‘subject-matter of great importance’ (*boktobyô*), and have immeasurable ‘value’ (*mûlyô*). At the same time, he inferred that value is based on subjective experience (‘if you can understand the

words it's valuable, otherwise it's not') rather than it being a reflection of a *puthi*'s objective worth. Abdul Korim's comments exposed a similarly relative view, but one based on ownership and personal connection—'Every book has a different value (*dam*). We think the *puthis* have more value [than ordinary books]; you may think your books have more value because you love them more'. As Boshir Ahmed put it, 'Just as the five fingers of a hand are different, some people like *puthis* and some people don't.' And Johir Uddin: 'I think that [*puthi-pora*] is a good thing, [but] others think it is bad.'<sup>1</sup> Even if the *puthi*-literature has intrinsic value for some, then, it is not universal; relativism holds sway in a way that it could never do in respect to the Qur'an (and, to a lesser extent, the Hadith).

Of course, as the ultimate source of authority in Islam, it is not really possible to compare the Qur'an with any other book (as I was frequently reminded), but doing so is one way to discover the status of the *puthis* in the lives of those who purport to value them. For example, before the Qur'an can be read, its reader must be ritually clean, a process involving ablution (*oju*). Dilara Begum, while asserting that *puthis* are 'holy' (*pak*) and that one should not be *unclean* when reading them, also made it clear that ablution should not be made before reading them. During its recitation, the Qur'an is placed on a stand to raise it from the floor; not a *puthi*. In my observations, *puthis* were placed by the readers in front of them, on the same mat, but on the floor, in close proximity to the reader's feet (Figure 4.2). When the Qur'an is not being read it is kept in a safe place, placed physically above other books (and above head-height) to indicate its pre-eminence. When Siraj Uddin was asked whether he kept his *puthis* above his other books, he responded emphatically, 'No! Why would I do that?! I keep them to the side of my books.' The point here is that while the Qur'an is treated with respect—as a sacred object, the *puthi* is not, despite claims for its respect-worthiness. The value of the *puthi*, as discussed in the previous chapter (in relation to function), is grounded in its content—a content which is taken from the Qur'an and Hadith.

This being so, it was somewhat surprising to observe how many of the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* that I encountered were incomplete.<sup>2</sup> Even if *puthis* are not considered sacrosanct, one would assume—on the basis of content, if for no other reason—that

<sup>1</sup> The 'others' Johir Uddin refers to are probably the orthodox or fundamentalist *mullahs* (*moulana*).

<sup>2</sup> Bengali *puthis* are still in print (at the time of writing), so it is not so unusual to find complete Bengali copies. Some of the other indicators mentioned below, however, equally apply to them.

Figure 4.2: A *puthi* on the floor by the reader's feet. Photograph by Angela Kane.



they would be well looked after. But the condition of many *puthis* is encapsulated in the saying ‘*aga nai, gōriō nai*’ (‘there is neither top nor bottom’), *puthis* which are missing their first and last pages. Central pages are generally in better condition, but it was not entirely uncommon for a *puthi*-reader to occasionally have to skip ahead on account of a torn page or a missing corner (Figure 4.3). The humid climate, natural disasters, and ‘destructive insects’ (Bhuiya 2000:35), admittedly militate against their preservation, but, older Hindu manuscripts—exposed to the same forces of nature—are generally found in better condition. There are other indicators, too, which suggest that *puthis* are not considered sacrosanct. Just a cursory look through my selection of photographs of *puthi* pages reveals a surprisingly large number of pages that have been written on. In some cases these may be notes to help the reader in performance, but this is not true of all of them. Figure 4.4, for instance, shows what appears to be numerical addition on a page of the *puthi Mohobbot Nama*. During the February 21 and March 9 events I noted other treatments of *puthis* which I found surprising. In the



Figure 4.3: Torn page and broken binding from a Bhela Shah puthi. Photograph by Angela Kane.



Figure 4.4: Numerical addition on the puthi Mohabbot Nama. Photograph by Angela Kane.



former, I saw Member-sab 'pick up a...*puthi* and use it as a fan!'<sup>3</sup> In the latter, I note Abdul Lotif, at one point, 'is looking through one *puthi* in particular... [and]...marks some pages by folding them in half.'<sup>4</sup> Another incident sees him flick ash from a cigarette which 'falls on the...*puthis*'.<sup>5</sup>

The way *puthis* were transported, too, also appeared less than respectful. For instance, I often sent Mujib on errands to search for individuals in his area who owned *puthis* (Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* in particular), and, if possible, to collect them and bring them to me so that they could be digitally photographed. He arrived one morning after a successful trip with a number of *puthis* which, to my astonishment, he proceeded to produce from his *lungi* (a kind of loin-cloth worn by men throughout Bangladesh)! It was raining, so keeping the *puthis* in his *lungi* did protect them from the rain, but this method of transportation seemed to me to be in stark contrast to the way in which I had observed Hindus carrying their books. These books were first wrapped carefully in red cloth and then placed in a bag for protection. They were unwrapped to be read and then wrapped up again for safe-keeping. Most of these books had their first and last pages preserved, which, while unsurprising in the light of their treatment, was notably different to the majority of Islamic *puthis* I saw. I am not trying to say that *puthis* are deliberately mistreated; but it is clear from their treatment that they are not revered as sacred objects in their own right.

To make just one final contrast between the Qur'an and the *puthi*: whereas the former, if torn, must either be burned or buried, discarded *puthis* are known to have been sold to itinerant paper-merchants for as little as 10 taka a kilo, or, if they are not sold, thrown away. This was Abdul Lotif's assessment of what would happen to his Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* after he dies, as people, generally, 'don't know the script' (*okṣor cintō nay*), and, therefore, do not know what they are. It was also said that this lack of familiarity with the Sylheti-Nagri script has led some people to destroy the *puthis* out of fear that they are books of magic spells and are, therefore, potentially dangerous. Whatever the reasons, *puthis* have been discarded and destroyed by those ignorant of their content. Nazrul had personal experience of how this can happen. During the day of March 9, 2005, before we attended the *puthi-pora* event together later that evening,

<sup>3</sup> RTO ('Real-Time Observations'), DAT010: 1.03.52.

<sup>4</sup> RTO, DAT014: 1.11.40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.26.10.

Nazrul and his cousin (Abdur Rahman) visited Lokhipasha having been informed by a relative about a man who owned and read *puthis* there. When they arrived, however, they discovered that this man had recently passed away and his widow had sold his *puthis* to the wandering vendors. Nazrul's response is well captured in his fieldnotes:

I was shocked and saddened upon hearing [of] the loss of her husband as well as the vanishing of our *puthis*. I guess pages of the *puthis* [are now] being used for selling *chanachoor* [*canacur*<sup>6</sup>] or for wrapping other goods. This incident...is...typical... of the way these *puthis* are being lost. The main problem as I see [it] lies with the... owner/reader of the *puthis*. [When] the reader/owner of the *puthis* [is] alive...the *puthis* stay around, but once the owner/reader dies, the *puthis* get lost. [They are] abandoned or vanish through neglect.

The distinction raised here between those who read and/or own *puthis* and those who do not is significant in regard to their treatment. A *puthi* may never be revered by its owner, it may be treated in some of the ways listed above, but it is extremely unlikely that the owner would discard it with indifference. But the fact that some people do, either out of ignorance of what they contain or (possibly in the case above) because of an inability to make use of them themselves, emphasises a more general point—that knowledge of the *puthi*-literature is not widespread enough as to be valued widely. If it was, even if the owner of a *puthi* died, the *puthi* would nevertheless be kept. Even if it was sold, the buyer would recognise what he had bought and it would not end up as wrapping-paper.

What are the implications of all this? First, although it is clear that a *puthi* is not considered as a sacred object today, this does not mean that it never was. After all, to maintain the comparison with the Qur'an, 'Islamic scripture...neither translated nor transliterated in pre-modern Bengal...first entered mass culture in a magical, [rather than a] liturgical, context' (Eaton 1993:294). This was obviously not its intended use in the past or its predominant use today (although it is still used as such in some parts of Bangladesh). In the second place, *puthis* have value for those who perceive it; not as physical objects but for their content. Paradoxically, some *puthi*-readers admitted that they learned more from the *puthis* than from the Qur'an. This is not surprising, though, considering the history of the Muslim Bengali literature. Because the act of reading, or hearing, the Qur'an read in Arabic is considered beneficial in its own right (in spite of available Bengali translations), it will remain unintelligible to those who

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<sup>6</sup> *Canacur*: 'a salty and spicy crisp snack comprising fried chick-pea[s], nuts and other things' (Ali, et al. 1999:198); better-known in Britain, generically, as 'Bombay Mix'.

cannot understand it. In contrast, those who read *puthis* or hear them being read can benefit, not through the act of *puthi-pora* itself, but because *puthis* were written in the vernacular. As Boshir Ahmed put it: ‘People can’t understand the Qur’an [because it is in Arabic], so they learn more from the *puthis*.’ To those who perceive their worth, this is where the value of the *puthi*-literature lies—in its intelligible content.

### *Language and Script*

Thus far, *puthi-pora* has been discussed inclusively in relation to the performance and performance contexts of Bengali and Sylheti-Nagri script *puthis*. This was not my original intention. I did not plan to study *puthi-pora* as a ‘Bengali’ phenomenon; in fact, before I began this research I was not even aware that Bengali *puthis* existed. My interest was in researching, what I assumed to be at the time, an exclusively regional Sylheti tradition.<sup>7</sup> This assumption was based primarily on the uniqueness of the script, but also on claims, such as Bhuiya’s (2000:91), that ‘poetic works in Jalalavadi [Sylheti-] Nagri may be regarded as an independent genre in the domain of greater Bengali literature.’ But in what sense ‘may [Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*-literature] be regarded as an independent genre’? Not with respect to *how* it is performed; for, having observed Bengali and Sylheti-Nagri script *puthis* being read side-by-side (chapter 2), and considering their performance contexts (chapter 3), there is nothing to suggest anything other than synonymy of performance practice in every respect. Is the Sylheti-Nagri/Bengali distinction, therefore, purely orthographical and linguistic? Or, are there other reasons why the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*-literature should be classified apart from the wider Muslim Bengali literature? To answer these questions, we need to look at the origins of the Sylheti-Nagri literature and its script.

The exact origins of the Sylheti-Nagri script are unknown (Bhuiya 2000:17-8; Lloyd-Williams, et al. 2002:4). The earliest extant manuscript *puthi*, *Talib Huson* by Gulam Huson, may have been written as early as 1549/50 A.D., although this date is in doubt as it may also have been written as late as 1774/5 A.D.<sup>8</sup> If the earlier date can be maintained, this would place *Talib Huson* within the same period as the early Muslim

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<sup>7</sup> See the Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Gulam Huson provides the date of writing on page 89, line 13 of *Talib Huson*, but it is believed that a copying error exists here. Different reconstructions have led to different interpretations of what the actual date should be. These are also dependent on which calendar scholars believe Gulam Huson used.



Bengali literature. All of the other Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* (manuscript and printed) fall between the period c.1750-1950 A.D.

On account of its name, 'Sylheti Nagari' (Chalmers 1996:9), and its apparent likeness to Deva-nagari, many, including the *puthi*-readers I interviewed, believe the script to be nothing more than a 'modification' of Devanagari 'adopted for the local speech' (Musa 1999:589). Chalmers believes these resemblances are evidential, and understands them to be a clear 'reflection of Sylhet's history.' He (1996:9) writes:

Sylheti is an eastern language, Devanagari a more western script. Why does Sylheti not have a script related to Bengali rather than Hindi? Various theories have been put forward. The Nagari script most probably came to Sylhet with the Muslim saint Shah Jalal [in 1303 A.D.] and the followers he gained in more western parts of India. Alternatively, it may have come with the Brahmins (Hindu priests) whom Sylhet's Hindu kings traditionally imported from North Bihar in India, with Brahmins from Gujarat, with the medieval Afghan rulers of Bengal, or with seventeenth century Bihari soldiers.

Lloyd-Williams, et al. (2002:4-5) concur that the script has Brahmic origins, but reject the idea of Devanagari derivation as superficial.<sup>9</sup> Having examined all other common North Indian scripts, they propose that Sylheti-Nagri is actually 'a form of Kaithi, a [Bihari] script (or family of scripts) which belongs to the main group of North Indian scripts.'<sup>10</sup> Like Chalmers, they see the history of migration into the Sylhet region as a 'highly plausible' way for the arrival of a form of the Kaithi script from Bihar (which is the region immediately joining Bengal to the north-west), but admit that 'precisely how and when this occurred is not clear.'

A different view, held by Bhuiya (2000:24-36) and Kamal,<sup>11</sup> is that the Sylheti-Nagri script, rather than being an adoption with modification of Devanagari or Kaithi, was the conscious product of Islamic innovation. Neither claims the script's complete originality, but both speak of a deliberate attempt to create a script suitable to 'serve as a vehicle of the literature to spread the doctrines and cardinals of the Islamic faith' (Singh in Bhuiya 2000:v-vi). Bhuiya (2000:34) contends that 'the introduction of [the] script is directly related to the expansion of Islam', and that the 'Aulisa [sic] and their disciples...expressed the glory of Islam in lyric forms of poem

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<sup>9</sup> They also reject the possibility of Bengali origins, noting that 'Bengali is perhaps the least similar to Syloti [Sylheti-] Nagri of all the north Indian scripts' (Lloyd-Williams, et al. 2002:6).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the most ancient form of the Sylheti-Nagri characters are identical to Bihari Kaithi, with the sole exception of the 'lo', and with the proviso that curves in Kaithi become angles in Sylheti-Nagri (as if in Roman, the shapes change from U to V).

<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted on December 13, 2002. Sayed Mustafa Kamal used to hold a post at the Islamic Foundation in Sylhet. He is the author of a number of books on Sylhet.

in Jālālāwādī [Sylheti] Nāgrī script from the beginning.’ This ‘beginning’ and ‘the expansion of Islam’ is not a reference to the efforts of the cultural mediators in the sixteenth century, but rather to the time of Shah Jalal or even before. Before Muslim rule, Bhuiya states, because Devanagari was so ‘soundly entrenched’ in the (then) Hindu kingdom, it could not be completely rejected. And, although he argues that Devanagari exerted a ‘maximum... influence’ on the formation of Sylheti-Nagri, he suggests that it was ‘highly desirable’ for the ‘Muslim preachers’ to do away with as much of its complexity as possible, not to mention its association with Hinduism, in order not to ‘hinder the spread of Islamic ideals’ (2000:25). For similar reasons, Bhuiya asserts, Arabic or Persian scripts were not used.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in ‘an attempt to relegate words of Sanskrit or its equivalent to the background’ (2000:26), Bhuiya states that the *puthi*-authors used Perso-Arabic vocabulary profusely.<sup>13</sup>

Kamal paints a confused picture of the origins of Sylheti-Nagri. On the one hand he says that the script was introduced in the seventeenth century (and prevalent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries); on the other hand, when explaining why Sylheti-Nagri was invented, he points to a Muslim reaction against the chaste Bengali developed by the English during the nineteenth century at Fort William College—a language, he says, which was influenced by Sanskrit and whose literature was full of Hindu deities. The Sylheti-Nagri script, he contends, was created so that Muslims would be able to write in a script which was ideologically compatible with Islam. Kamal goes on to say that, while Bengali was understood by the Muslims as a ‘Hindu’ script, Sylheti-Nagri was understood by the Hindus as a ‘Muslim’ script. For this reason, he states further, Hindus did not use it. Bhuiya does not agree, however. He (2000:1) writes:

Although its [the literature in Sylheti-Nagri’s] primary objective was to point to the glory of Islam and [to] spread the account of Hajrat Muhammad’s life among the illiterate Muslim masses in the rural areas, certain gifted rural poets and spiritual aspirants have depicted several popular stories from [the] Puranas of the Hindus in Nāgrī works.

<sup>12</sup> Although the use of Arabic or Persian scripts, with all their Islamic associations, would have been ideologically more desirable than Devanagari, Bhuiya (2000:26) writes that had they adopted them, ‘Their...objective [to spread Islamic ideals] would [have been] frustrated by adherence to orthodoxy and conservatism [for its own sake, as these scripts were just as complex as Devanagari, if not more so]. They were alive to this.’

<sup>13</sup> In chapter 5 of his book, Bhuiya (2000:99-131) lists over 800 Perso-Arabic words used in the three most common Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* in circulation: *Halotun Nobi*, *Mohobbot Nama*, and *Jongo Nama*.

To give an example, Bhuiya cites the *puthi Rag Horibonsho* by Din Bhobanondo, an intriguing reference considering that the author is believed to have converted to Islam from Hinduism (Rahman 1993:17-25). This may actually bolster Kamal's claim rather than contradict it, and, if the content nevertheless appears to be 'Hindu', it only aligns this *puthi* with Roy's (1983) arguments in favour of an Islamic syncretistic tradition. Even if Sylheti-Nagri cannot be claimed to be an exclusively 'Muslim' script, there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* had Muslim authors. This is implied by Lloyd-Williams et al. (2002:4), who, while asserting the script's Brahmic origins, nonetheless acknowledge that the 'cultural roots' of those who used it were 'Perso-Arabic' and they 'were not constrained in their development and use of the script by conventions associated with Brahmic traditions.'

If we put aside the linguistic and historical (in)accuracies held by Bhuiya and Kamal for the moment, their perception that the Sylheti-Nagri script was created by Muslims in order to disseminate Islamic ideals, one free from the taint of Hinduism, is consistent with the concern that the Muslim cultural mediators had from the sixteenth century in using the Bengali language, and by extension its script, as the vehicle for local communication (which emerged again during the Islamic reform movements in the nineteenth century). Even if Sylheti-Nagri is a form of Kaithi, as Lloyd-Williams et al. assert, Kaithi's dissimilarity to Bengali may have given the script an impression of being ideologically more compatible with Islam than Bengali, especially in the light of its non-sacred historical use.<sup>14</sup>

But Sylheti-Nagri was not a substitute 'Muslim' script for Bengali writers; its orthography was used for the Sylheti language. Because of Sylheti's fewer phonemes, the script has fewer characters and is consequently less complex than the Devanagari or Bengali scripts.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Sylheti-Nagri was accessible, so much so that women were able to learn it.<sup>16</sup> Although Sylheti-Nagri was a script for the 'common people' (Bhuiya 2000:1, 26; Chalmers 1996:9; Kamal 2002), it would be wrong to give the

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd-Williams et al. (2002:5) write that 'Devanagari, Bengali and Oriya were all scripts mainly reserved for writing sacred texts in Sanskrit. The Kashiya scripts [of which Kaithi is one], by contrast, though of a common origin, were primarily for secular use...' This is significant in the context. The Kaithi script, whatever its origins, did not have the Sanskritic—and therefore the Hindu—connotations that both Devanagari and Bengali (which was also used, as we have already seen, to popularise the narratives of local gods and goddesses) did. And, being of 'common origin', Kaithi was an easier script to master.

<sup>15</sup> See Lloyd-Williams et al. (2002:10-15).

<sup>16</sup> Chalmers (1996:10) writes: 'in a society often assumed to be sexist, the ability to read Sylheti-Nagri was known to be particularly widespread among women. Of what other Indian script can that be said?'

impression that its appeal was limited to those who could not read Bengali; that it was only of interest to the lower classes or less-educated. Indeed, Abdul Lotif<sup>17</sup> 'included the Bengali alphabet' in his *Silet Nagrīr Pohela Ketab* ('A Sylheti-Nagri Primer'), 'for the sake of those who know Bengali' in order that they might 'teach...themselves by comparing the Bengali letters'. In his 'editorial plea' Lotif avers that 'countless people want to know Nagri' although he does not say why. He does, however, provide one incentive in his primer for learning Sylheti-Nagri; the inclusion of *Doikhurar Rag* ('Songs of Doikhura [curd-eater]'), 'ballads and songs', which 'reading' he says, 'will gladden the heart.'

The inducement to learn Sylheti-Nagri surely went beyond *Doikhurar Rag*. Of course, this may have been an initial carrot, but learning the script would give people access to all of the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* that were available at this time (those in print, at least, which was a sizable corpus by 1930 A.D.).<sup>18</sup> If Bhuiya and Kamal are correct in understanding Sylheti-Nagri to be a script with (largely) Islamic connotations, these *puthis* may have appealed to Bengali-literate Muslims particularly at a time when the purificatory campaigns of the reformers were mounting an assault on Bengali culture. The script's Islamic identity was not mentioned by the *puthi*-readers I interviewed, however, but many of them said that it is easier to read than Bengali. Abdul Korim was more direct. He said he does not like reading Bengali, but he 'feels good' reading Sylheti-Nagri because both the 'words' (the script) and the language are clear. He prefers Sylheti-Nagri, to Bengali, *puthis* because they (naturally) sound the most Sylheti. In these *puthis*, he said, stating a further reason, 'there is everything about Allah and his Prophet'.

Historically, then, it would be hard to make a case for classifying the Bengali and Sylheti-Nagri traditions of *puthi-pora* separately on the basis of their language and scripts alone. If anything, the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* tradition is a supreme example of the efforts of the Bengali cultural mediators (and those who followed) to bridge the linguistic divide in communicating Islam to the masses in their vernacular. Of course, the language and script of a *puthi* will affect who can read what, and, therefore, it will have an impact on individual repertoires (if a *puthi*-reader can read Sylheti-Nagri but

<sup>17</sup> Not to be confused with Abdul Lotif the *puthi*-reader!

<sup>18</sup> I say 'in print' because some of the manuscript *puthis*, as I shall suggest below, may only have been available to the disciples of the *pīr* who wrote them.

not Bengali, then their personal repertoire will be limited to the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*). This does not affect the *puthi-poṛa* repertoire in general terms, though, for as noted above, there is nothing to distinguish the performance contexts of either tradition. To determine what the *puthi-poṛa* repertoire consists of, we need to consider *puthi*-type and its connection with authorship, content, availability, and compositional form.

### *Authorship and Type*

Siraj Uddin's ignorance of the author of *Amir Hamja*, the Bengali *puthi* he read at the March 9 event, challenged an early assumption: that the *puthi* tradition is inextricably linked with the Cult of *Pīr*. If, as I assumed at the time, the authors of the *puthis* were *pīrs*, if the *puthis* contained their teachings and if their disciples revered them through reading their *puthis* (or by listening to them), it seemed logical that the *puthi*-readers, at least (if not their hearers), would know who wrote them. But it became clear during the course of my fieldwork that it was not uncommon for a *puthi*-reader to be familiar with the content of a *puthi* but not its author (Siraj Uddin was not alone in needing to turn to the title page of his *puthi*, or the introductory or final sections if they were still there, in order to tell me who had composed it), and, as seen in the previous chapter, there was nothing in my experience to suggest a connection with shrines in relation to performance context generally, or with the shrines of specific *pīrs*. This, in itself, does not contradict the assumption, however; it merely suggests the possibility of different performance contexts for different *puthi*-types—hence the distinction I made between mainstream and esoteric *puthis*. It is this distinction I wish to expand upon in this section, a distinction based primarily on availability (on those *puthis* which I did or did not 'happen upon'), but which also appears to have a correlation with authorship and content, and on whether a *puthi* is in a printed or a manuscript form.<sup>19</sup> I will begin with the esoteric *puthis*.

Although I was not able to observe the performance of this *puthi*-type in the public events I attended during my fieldwork in 2005, I did have the opportunity to visit the *majar* (shrine) of the *pīr* Sitalong Shah during my first extended trip to Sylhet (October 2002 to August 2003). Here, I met Abdus Shukur, the *majar*'s guardian and Sitalong Shah's great-grandson, who told me his great-grandfather's life story which

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<sup>19</sup> There is also a correlation between structure and form will be considered in the next section.

contained numerous corroborations of his '*pīr* status'.<sup>20</sup> I was also able to record some of Sitalong Shah's songs sung by Abdus Shukur and a couple of his other non-familial disciples which are contained in his *puthis*: *Moshkil Toran*, *Rag Baula*, and *Kiyamot Nama*. These were not performed at Sitalong Shah's *majar*. However, I did attend the shrine-complex of Shah Jalal in Sylhet Town one Thursday night, and this experience, interpreted in the light of activities at shrines in other parts of South Asia, as well as by the relationship of *pīr* and *murid* (disciple) described in the secondary literature,<sup>21</sup> indicated what might take place at Sitalong Shah's *majar*, and when, and what their significance might be. Together, these strands formed the basis of my assumption that the *puthi* tradition and the *pīr*-cult are inseparable.

Even if similar activities do occur at Sitalong Shah's *majar*, or at the *majars* of other *pīr*-authors of Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*, it does not necessarily follow that the 'act' of reading his *puthis* (or singing his songs) is tantamount to venerating *him*, for at least two reasons. First, knowledge of Sitalong Shah's songs is not limited to his disciples; they are known throughout Sylhet and are sung and listened to by those who would not consider themselves to be his disciples. Second, *he* is *not* the focus of the songs; the events of his life, those things which set him apart as *pīr*, are not their subject. Although I did not assume that they were, this *is* the kind of subject-matter, according to Roy (1983:208), which distinguishes the literature of the cult of *Pīr*—or, 'the syncretistic little tradition'—from that of 'the syncretistic great tradition'. In stark contrast to focusing on *pīrs*, Bushell (2006:194) writes that Sitalong Shah 'strongly emphasised that the way to Allah was through the Prophet and the way to hidden [the esoteric or mystical] teaching, *marifah*, was through observing the Law, *shariah*.' For a *pīr*, this is a largely 'orthodox' position.

It is clear that the formula '*pīr*-author equals *pīr*-cult' is far too simplistic. To stay with Roy's (1983:187-206) classification, Sitalong Shah's *puthis*, on account of their content and form, would be categorised as 'Muslim "*vaiṣṇav*" lyrical literature', a sub-section of the esoteric-mystic literature, part of 'the syncretistic great tradition'.

<sup>20</sup> Although someone can be a *pīr* if (at least) some people consider him to be one (with or without any specific signs), certain signs are usually claimed (one or more from the following): (1) he has/had the power to perform miracles; (2) he has/had supernatural knowledge; (3) he is/was an ascetic (typically, having spent twelve years in seclusion, usually in the jungle); (4) he can/could consort with a tiger without harm or fear (either a tiger is/was reported to visit him regularly, or he sometimes rides/rode a tiger); and (5) he keeps his hair long.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Nanda and Talib (1989:125-44).

Lloyd-Williams (2001:1) agrees with this classification; not of Sitalong Shah's *puthis* specifically, but of the Sylheti-Nagri tradition in general. He writes: 'Almost all of the literature falls within, or is at least influenced by, the Vaishnava Muslim tradition'. Sitalong Shah was, admittedly, more 'orthodox' than some of the other Sylheti poets. He forbade the use of musical instruments to accompany the singing of his songs, and emphasised *Shariah* Law. According to Bhuiya (2000:97), 'He was deeply disturbed by contemporary indifference to religious practices and tried to reintroduce religious values in[to] the society.' Yet, his works nevertheless contain Vaishnava and esoteric-mystic referents which place them in this 'esoteric' stream.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Rahman (1993) lists Sitalong Shah along with forty-one other 'significant' mystical poets of Sylhet, dating from the fifteenth through to the twentieth centuries.

There were many other Sylheti mystical poets, but they did not all use Sylheti-Nagri, nor are all their works contained in *puthis*. Of those who did use Sylheti-Nagri, however, most of their *puthis* have remained in manuscript form because their authors prohibited their printing. As Lloyd-Williams (2001:12) explains:

Sylheti pirs commonly imposed restrictions on the circulation of their writings. The restrictions could be relatively light, for example Sitalong Shah merely prohibited the printing of his works and the singing of a 'raga' or song without its associated 'poyar' or narrative section..., but otherwise permitted open dissemination orally or by hand copying. At the other extreme are works restricted only to the initiated. The extract below by Syed Shanur from the beginning of 'Nur Nosihot' expresses this vividly. I have personally observed the fear that some Sylhetis still have today of handling these books in case [of] attracting a curse.

Lloyd-Williams (2001:12) goes on to translate this extract, what he terms 'Shah Nur's "Copyright Curse"', as follows:

If anyone would write out this book, he should copy the whole, exactly as the original. Whoever takes a song without its 'poyar', know for sure his spirit will be cursed. And if anyone would expand it with commentary, he will be guilty through and through. As a sinner he will not meet the Prophet, nor receive his intercession but will lose the faith. He who disobeys his fakir's voice is far from God, will never get sight of him nor go into his presence. If he studies without a Pir or a Guide, he will end up reading these mysteries in hell. To take the 'body mysteries'<sup>23</sup> without Pir or Guide, puts a curse on his wealth in this world's realm.

<sup>22</sup> Bushell (2006:202) writes that even though Sitalong Shah 'advocated *shariah* observance as being foundational for *marifah* experience, it is the actual shape of the Arabic letters that conveyed spiritual meaning. Rather than doctrinal content conveyed by the meaning of words, it is the shape of the letters themselves that symbolise the believer's relationship with God.'

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd-Williams footnotes 'body mysteries' (*toner bed*), explaining that it refers to Tantric doctrines which apply mystical significance to parts of the human body.

The relationship between a *rag* (song) and *poyar* (narrative section) will be mentioned below in respect to form. It is important to note here Shah Nur's emphasis on learning with a *pīr*. Composed in 1820, Shah Nur's *Nur Nosihot* ('Teachings of Light') may have been a response to the attacks by the reformers on the institution of '*pīrism*'. As Ahmed (1988:66) writes, 'They [the traditionalist theologians] published a number of tracts in support of *pirism*, explaining its social and religious importance: people were urged to persist in the devotion of their *pīrs*, and [they were] cautioned against hostile propaganda.' Although Shah Nur's 'Copyright Curse' does not emphasise the context of 'hostile propaganda' specifically, and although this *puthi* was never printed, it was composed during the time of reformist opposition, and Shah Nur would certainly have been alive to it. As Lloyd-Williams states above, *Nur Nosihot* was a work 'restricted only to the initiated' and Shah Nur is clearly reminding his disciples of the importance of their continued need of *pīrs*.

So, while the formula '*pīr*-author equals *pīr*-cult' is too simplistic, the esoteric content of some *puthis* places them firmly within a mystical tradition that perpetuates the need for the insights of such spiritual guides. Shah Nur's may be an extreme case, but it nevertheless helps to explain why I did not merely 'happen upon' *puthis* of this type. Both because of their esoteric content and (more practically) the time needed to copy them by hand, the manuscript *puthis* are not widely available. They are intended only for 'the initiated'.

*Puthis* printed in Sylheti-Nagri, in contrast, were obviously meant for a public audience. Their content is broad, or mainstream. It is not surprising, then, that the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* most well-known, owned, read, and heard today—the *puthis* I 'happened upon' most frequently—were those which were most widely printed and distributed, namely, *Jongo Nama*, *Halotun Nobi*, and *Mohobbot Nama*. Little is known of Wahed Ali, the author of the first. Nor is it known when he composed the work or when it was printed. The subject matter of the *puthi*, however, is familiar. *Jongo Nama*—or *Boro Jongo Nama* ('Account of the Great War')—chronicles the history of Hason and Huson, the great-grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, and the massacre at Karbala in 680 A.D.<sup>24</sup> As shown in the previous chapter, this *puthi* is read most frequently during the 'moon' of *Mōhorrom*. Roy (1983:87-110, 257, 260-1) has

<sup>24</sup> See Dunham (1997:4-6) for a useful summary of the Karbala events.



classified Bengali versions of this *puthi* under the historical-mythological literature, as part of 'the syncretistic great tradition'. Cashin (1995:321-3), similarly, lists Bengali versions of *Jongo Nama* (either titled as such or based on the same themes) with other 'Historical biographical mythological legendary texts'. Unlike some of the esoteric-mystic literature, the themes of *Jongo Nama* are pan-Islamic and exogenous, even if presented in local pre-Islamic forms.

The author of the other two printed Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*—*Halotun Nobi* and *Mohobbot Nama*—was Sadek Ali, born in 1798 A.D. By profession, Sadek Ali was a district judge. Of all the authors who wrote in the Sylheti-Nagri script, Bhuiya (2000: 55) writes that Sadek Ali is 'by far the best known.' This is largely, if not exclusively, due to the popularity of *Halotun Nobi* ('Account of the Prophet'), composed in 1855, 'the most popular [Sylheti-Nagri] work of all' (Lloyd-Williams 2001:1); a *puthi* 'read in every [M]uslim household of Sylhet and Cachar district [Assam, North East India]' (Bhuiya 2000:55). My experience of locating Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* confirms this *puthi* to be the most ubiquitous in Sylhet today. This is not particularly surprising, however, considering that it was also the most widely printed. Various editions of the *puthi* were published in Sylheti-Nagri, and, when the Islamia Press was destroyed by fire in the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971, even a Bengali translation was made (Bhuiya 2000:60).

*Halotun Nobi*, a biography of the Prophet Muhammad's life, would, no doubt, have appealed to all Muslims. But there may have been another reason underlying its popularity and mass distribution. The *puthi* was composed, and subsequently printed, during the period of Islamic revival and reform. As a convert from Hinduism, Sadek Ali was not a typical reformer. Yet he epitomises the spirit of the reformist preachers particularly because of his conversion. Having turned his back on Hinduism and all that it stands for, Sadek Ali was filled with 'remorse', comments Ahmed (1988:57), 'at finding the Muslims [in Bengal] almost as idolatrous as the Hindus'. He writes into this situation in his *puthi Rod Kuphur* ('Refutation of Infidels'). It was not *Rod Kuphur*, however, but *Halotun Nobi* which was to become Sadek Ali's most popular work. Roy (1983:95) writes that some of the early biographical works of the cultural mediators, in attempting to reduce the polarity between the pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions, even attempted 'to bring the Prophet himself in line with the comparable symbols of the Hindu tradition.' No doubt aware of the works which contained these

‘theological problems’,<sup>25</sup> it plausible that Sadek Ali, who could see their outworking in the syncretism of his day, wrote *Halotun Nobī* in order to provide an alternative, and more ‘scripturally-based’ account of the Prophet’s life.

In the propaganda war that raged during this period, between the leaders of the reform movements and the traditionalist *mullahs* and *pīrs* (in which Sadek Ali clearly had a part), it was the positive, and more ‘orthodox’,<sup>26</sup> presentation of Islam’s founder in *Halotun Nobī* (in contrast to the polemical nature of *Rod Kuphur*, and some of the other *puthis* of this period) which, no doubt, led to its wider publication, distribution, and, ultimately, its wider utilisation by the masses than all of the other *puthis* written in Sylheti-Nagri. For, such an attempt, if not explicitly anti-syncretistic, could not but have received support from all sides.

Second to *Halotun Nobī* is Sadek Ali’s *Mohobbot Nama*, or, *Yusuf-Julekha* as it is more commonly known (‘The Love Story of Joseph and Zulaikha’), composed in c.1850 A.D. This *puthi*, an adaptation of Jami’s original (c.1475 A.D.), shows Sadek Ali’s familiarity with Perso-Arabic literature, and was, perhaps, his attempt to provide a more exogenous version of the story than those that would otherwise have been in circulation at the time. ‘At one level,’ writes Lloyd-Williams (2001:6), the stories in *Mohobbot Nama* are ‘pure entertainment. But to say that entertainment is their main purpose is far from the truth.’ He continues:

...[T]he major theme of Sadek Ali’s ‘Mohobbotnama,’ taken as a whole is very much in the Vaishnava tradition of using the theme of human love, especially forbidden love (Krishna’s lover Radha was married to another man) to express the intensity of the love of a worshipper for God and the reproach the worshipper often experiences at the hands of the non-devout majority. Such forbidden love has to be conducted in secret with enforced separations intensifying the longing of the lover for the beloved. In ‘Mohobbotnama’, Zulaikha’s illicit love for her handsome slave Yusuf is unrequited due to Yusuf’s purity, leading to catastrophe in both of their lives and decades of separation before eventual union. Whilst this is the grand theme, there are sub-themes of other tragic separations with eventual reunion—Yakub (Jacob) from his son Yusuf (Joseph), Yusuf from his brothers, and even the wolf from his lost younger brother. The evil, selfish passion of Zulaikha (Potiphar’s wife in the Biblical version) for Yusuf is an allegory of man’s false, self-seeking love for God, which needs to be transformed into a pure, selfless love of God for his own sake.

<sup>25</sup> Roy refers to two works composed by Soiyod Sultan, in particular, *Nobī-bomīśo* and ‘*Shab-i Miraj*’.

<sup>26</sup> I am assuming Sadek’s Ali’s *Halotun Nobī* to be a more ‘orthodox’ account of the Prophet on the basis of his reformist position. Without studying the text in detail, however, it is impossible to say how his account differs from, say, from those of Soiyod Sultan.

As a Hindu convert, Sadek Ali would have been familiar with the Vaishnava parallels in the *Yusuf-Julekha* story. While Sadek Ali was no doubt anti-Vaishnava (as he was against anything Hindu), Lloyd-Williams suspects that:

...one purpose for writing *Mohobbot Nama* may have been to prove to Vaisnavas that Islam met their needs, in that it too had (illustrated in the *Yusuf-Zulaikha* story) the possibility of the worshipper's relationship with Allah being like that of a lover with his beloved. There is even the aspect of the suffering of separation followed by joyful reunion, just as in the *Radha-Krishna* story.<sup>27</sup>

Whether or not this purpose was in Sadek Ali's mind, *Mohobbot Nama*, like *Halotun Nobi*, was another constructive rather than confrontational contribution to the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*-literature. This, no doubt, also led to its wider appeal (among women and the young, in particular), widespread printing, and wider distribution, than some of the other *puthis* he composed.

Unsurprisingly in the light of the above, all the *puthis* read in the public *puthi-pora* events I observed during my fieldwork in 2005 were printed, mainstream *puthis*, Sylheti-Nagri and Bengali. They were the *puthis* that I 'happened upon'.<sup>28</sup> Apart from the reality that there are many more copies of the printed (rather than manuscript) *puthis*, the fact that their content is mainstream (rather than esoteric) is surely one factor that determines their continued public performance. For, the puritanical spirit and the pan-Islamism of the nineteenth century reformers have found new expression in the fundamentalism which is impacting the whole of the modern Islamic world. The Islamic traditions that still exhibit syncretism are being actively suppressed.<sup>29</sup> It is not that the mainstream *puthis* are considered orthodox (even those composed during the reform movements, such as *Halotun Nobi* or *Mohobbot Nama*), but, because they are less overtly heterodox, they are certainly more acceptable than the kind of esoteric *puthis* considered above. There is possibly another reason, however, one which is related to form.

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<sup>27</sup> Personal communication, 26.06.07.

<sup>28</sup> I tried to locate certain esoteric *puthis* and their performers, but I was unsuccessful in all my attempts for a variety of reasons (even in pursuing my contacts with the performers of Sitalong Shah's *puthis*).

<sup>29</sup> In January 2004, for example, during the annual *uros* celebrations at Shah Jalal's *majar* in Sylhet, a bomb exploded killing several people. Although this was not linked to the activities of a specific group, it appeared to be part of a wider series of attacks by Islamic fundamentalists on shrines in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan more generally.

### *Structure and Form*

In his conversation with Nazrul, prior to the start of the *puthi-pora* event on March 9, Pīr Ali stated that they have ‘*puthi* readings’ at his home, but not ‘singing’. This was, he explained, because of the expressed views of the head of the nearby *madrassa*—a view that exposes the historical difference in Islamic conception between devotional sound art and song, in which the ‘reading’ of *puthis* may be tolerated but the ‘singing’ of songs is not. During the March 9 event, however, the singing of songs began with the *puthi Rag Horiboṁsho*, but it did not prevent those who were present from wanting ‘to shut the door’, Nazrul records in his fieldnotes, ‘possibly because of the noise reaching the *moulavi*’s ears’. As this had not happened during the reading of the other, narrative-based *puthis*, it proved that the performance of these songs was perceived differently, irrespective of the fact that they were performed from a physical *puthi*-text. This suggests that the compositional form (or forms) of a *puthi* determines whether its content is perceived as ‘read’ or ‘sung’, which logically must determine whether that *puthi* can be considered to be part of the *puthi-pora* (*puthi*-reading) repertoire or not.

This is not really surprising. For as we saw in chapter 1, the cultural mediators adopted the *two* literary forms which were available at the time (Roy 1983:87, 187): short ‘lyrical compositions written...in the popular middle-Bengali *pada* (short song) style of *vaiṣṇav* origin’, which were of ‘esoteric-mystic import’, and ‘long narrative poems with historical, mythical, and romantic content’. *Rag Horiboṁsho*, both in its content and form (a collection of short lyrical songs), can easily be identified as being of the first. The other *puthis* read during the March 9 event—*Amir Hamja*, *Mohobbot Nama*, and *Joiguner Puthi*—can all be identified as belonging to the second. Hence the general distinction made between narrative and song in Figure 4.1. It is interesting that the two *puthi*-types discussed above also tend to be defined more by one of these compositional forms than the other—that mainstream *puthis* consist primarily of long narrative poems and that esoteric *puthis* consist primarily of lyrical songs. Emically, it would appear that it is only the content of the former that is properly considered to be ‘read’, and, therefore, it is only these *puthis* that can be properly considered to be part of the *puthi-pora* repertoire.

This is a broad distinction, though, and will need to be refined by future study. For, although it is emically clear that narrative poems are ‘read’ (*poṛa*) and songs are ‘sung’ (*gaoya*), a number of *puthis* contain both narrative and song. *Jongo Nama*, for instance, a mainstream narrative *puthi*, includes *jarī* songs.<sup>30</sup> Sitalong Shah’s *Moshkil Toran* (‘Rescue from Trouble’) and Shah Nur’s *Nur Nosihot* (‘Teachings of Light’), esoteric *puthis* which consist primarily of *rags* (songs), also include *poṛars*, which Lloyd-Williams referred to above as ‘narrative sections’.<sup>31</sup> In these *puthis*, the *rags* and *poṛars* are connected. The purpose of a *rag* is to introduce a theme in a musically appealing way—to catch the attention and to entice a listener before its *poṛa* is read. The *poṛa* serves as an explanation, elaboration, or a commentary on the theme of the *rag*; the reason why Sitalong Shah and Shah Nur forbade their separation in copying or performance. In *puthis* like these, where there are narrative (or didactic) sections that are not a part of an overarching narrative, it is difficult to know whether these should be included in the *puthi-poṛa* repertoire or not.

As I was not exposed to the performance of these *puthis* during my fieldwork, I cannot answer these questions in this thesis. Apart from *Rag Horibonsho*, all of the *puthis* I heard were mainstream narrative *puthis* whose performance was described by all the *puthi*-readers I interviewed as *puthi-poṛa* (*Jongo Nama*, too, in spite of its *jarī* songs). As it is clear that the performance of the mainstream narrative *puthis* is *puthi-poṛa*, I have focused my melodic analysis (in the following chapter) on this *puthi*-type only.<sup>32</sup> There are two main tune-types used to read these *puthis* which share the name of the poetic metres of the narrative sections they are associated with in their reading: *poṛa* and *tripodī*.

As we saw in chapter 1, *poṛa* and *tripodī* were the two main metres used in the composition of the long narrative poems of the pre-Islamic, Bengali Hindu literary traditions. According to Chatterji (2002:130), *poṛa*, which he describes as a ‘special metre of Bengali’, is the fourteenth century development of the ‘*mātrā-vṛtta* metre, of

<sup>30</sup> The inclusion of *jarīgan* (‘lamentation songs’), however, is consistent with the narrative theme of the *puthi*: the massacre at Karbala.

<sup>31</sup> As we shall see below, *poṛa* is the main poetic metre used in the narrative *puthis*.

<sup>32</sup> The section headings for some of the songs in the esoteric *puthis* suggest genres which, if performed in their own right, would be defined as singing. These include *baul*, *bhañiol*, *sari*, *bhojon* (in *Moshkil Toran*), *jarī*, *baromashi*, *dhamail* (in *Nur Nosihot*), *gozol* and *khial/kheyal* (in *Nur Poricoy*), many of which have already been the subject of musical analysis.

16 or 15 *moræ*, found in the Caryās’ which ‘became, by an arrangement of *akṣaras* [syllables], a syllabic metre of 8+6=14 *akṣaras*’ per couplet line. Unlike *poyar* metre, *tripodī* (also called *lacaṛī*) was not a Bengali development. It is found as early as the twelfth century in Jayadeva’s *Gīta Govinda*. Although the songs of the *Gīta Govinda* are written in Sanskrit, Chatterji (2002:125) comments that, ‘in style and execution, and in their rimed *mātrā-vṛtta* metre, they are more like vernacular [poetry] than anything else.’ By the time the Muslim cultural mediators began writing their acculturated *puthi* works, the use of *poyar* and *tripodī* were well-established in Bengali literary tradition.

Of the two, *poyar* is the principal ‘narrative’ metre. Roy (1983:87) writes that it ‘formed the bulk [of the narratives] and helped to forward the story’. *Poyar* consists of two lines of 14 syllables, which together form a rhyming couplet (the final syllable of the first line rhyming with the final syllable of the second line). A caesura after the eighth syllable divides each line into two syllable groups (8+6, 8+6). This is *poyar* in its ‘purist’ form. In its use in *jarigan* poetry, however, Dunham (1997:124) notes that ‘the length of *jarigan* [*poyar*] lines is frequently irregular,’ but a ‘*jarigan* singer is an expert at rendering such lines smoothly through verbal and melodic devices, which he employs to lengthen a line with less than fourteen syllables or to reduce the length of a line containing an excess of syllables.’ *Poyar* couplets of exactly 14 syllables per line are also rare in *puthis* I have seen, so *puthi*-readers employ similar devices to lengthen or shorten them to match the tune they are using. I am not convinced that the *puthi*-readers attempt to make each line conform to a 14 syllable per line scheme, although the rhyme of the couplet is clear, following the pattern: A, A; B, B; etc. The rhyming syllable at the end of the first line is followed by double vertical lines (A ||); its parallel rhyme at the end of the second line is followed by an asterisk (A \*). These markings are the same in the Sylheti-Nagri (see the red box in Figure 4.5) and Bengali script *puthis* (see the red box in Figure 4.6). The couplet structure is visually clearer in the former due to its spacing.

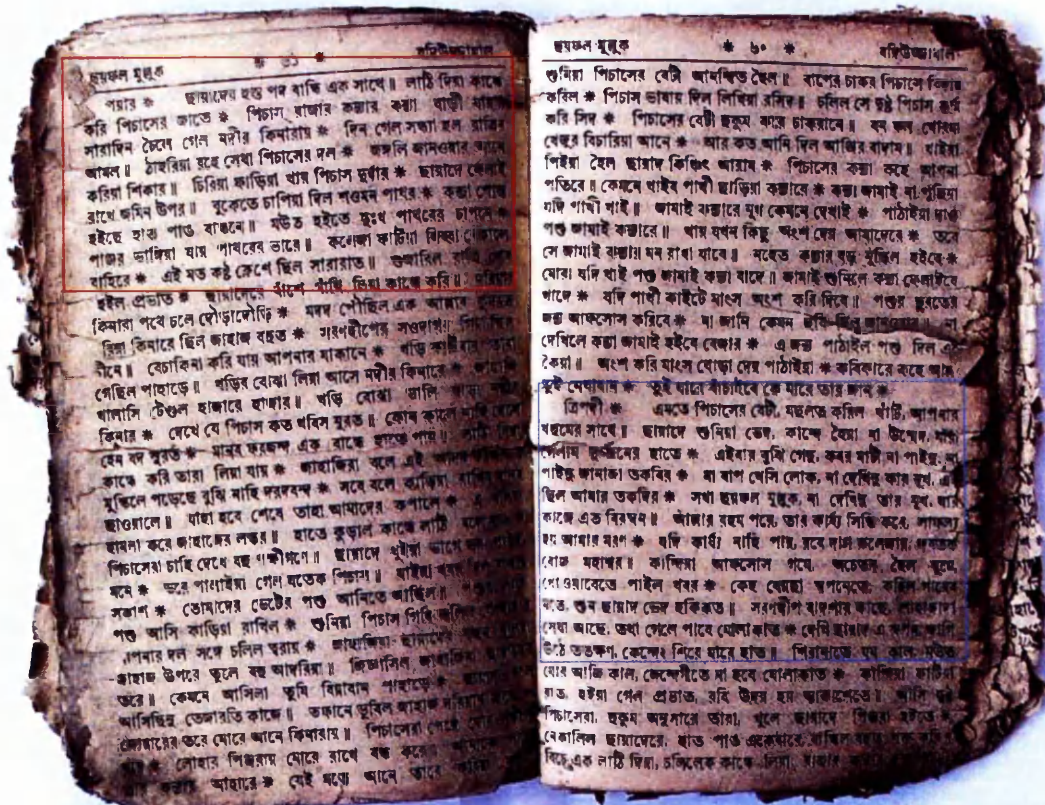
*Tripodī* metre is also couplet-based. Each line consists of 20 syllables, divided into three groups, with two caesuras following the sixth and twelfth syllables (6+6+8, 6+6+8). Again, this is its ‘purist’ form. But, as with *poyar*, the numbers of syllables in each *tripodī* couplet varies, although the tripartite division of each line remains clear.



Figure 4.5: Poyar and tripodi sections in Jongo Nama (Sylheti-Nagri). Photograph by Angela Kane.



Figure 4.6: Poyar and tripodi sections in Choyphul Mulluk (Bengali). Photograph by Angela Kane.



This is due to the rhyme scheme which consists of a rhyme occurring at the end of the first and second group of syllables, as well as at the end of the fourth and fifth group of syllables. A separate rhyme occurs at the end of the first line and rhymes with the end of the second line. The poetic structure, then, is as follows: AAB, CCB; etc. This structure is well-represented in the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* (see the blue box in Figure 4.5). The first two groups of syllables of the first line of the couplet are seen on one line, separated by commas (A, A),<sup>33</sup> with the third group of syllables centred underneath, its rhyme marked with double vertical lines (B ||), just like the end of the first *poṇar* couplet line. The second *tripodī* line follows the same pattern—the first two groups of syllables separated by commas (C, C,) and the final group of syllables, and the final rhyme, like the end of the second *poṇar* couplet line, marked by an asterisk (B\*). These markings are the same in the Bengali *puthi* (see the blue box in Figure 4.6), but the *tripodī* structure is, again, clearer in the Sylheti-Nagri *puthi*. The readers of the Bengali *puthis*, however, said that the way the verse is represented on the page makes little difference to how easy it is to read.

Understanding how these two metres (and their corresponding tunes) relate to each other was one of my goals in interviewing the *puthi*-readers. This was no easy task, however, and I received a number of different answers. The majority of *puthi*-readers expressed their understanding of the relationship in terms of narrative function—that *tripodī* sections follow *poṇar* sections in order to expand, or to elaborate on an aspect of the *poṇar* in more detail, particularly aspects of the narrative that are sad. *Tripodī*, therefore, in the minds of many of the readers is synonymous with sorrow and lament. Whether this narrative function can be proved or not, and whether *tripodī* sections are always sorrowful, will require further textual analysis.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

This chapter has focused on aspects relating to the *puthi*, the content of the *puthi-poṇar* repertoire. The following points were made. First, even though much of the content of the *puthi*-literature is taken from the Qur'an or the Hadith, *puthis* themselves are not treated as sacred objects. Therefore, *puthi-poṇar* cannot be described as a 'scriptural' tradition and it has no objective authority (although it has subjective value). Second,

<sup>33</sup> Sometimes small circles (•) are used in place of commas to divide these first two syllable groups.



while Sylheti-Nagri and Bengali script *puthis* form easily distinguishable corpuses of literature (and define the repertoires for those who cannot read both), the language or script of a *puthi* does not affect how it is performed. This indicates the broad scope of *puthi-pora* as a performance tradition. Third, there appear to be two different types of *puthi*: mainstream and esoteric. The former tend to be printed, have narrative content, are widely available, and widely read. The latter tend to have remained in manuscript form, have esoteric or mystical content (which needs to be interpreted by a spiritual guide, or *pīr*), and are not widely available or widely read (in public settings at least). Fourth, mainstream *puthis*, having narrative content, use narrative form, particularly *poṇar* and *tripodī* metres; esoteric *puthis*, containing the teachings of *pīrs*, employ a variety of genres, chief among which is song.

At this stage, it is not possible to be more precise in classifying the content of the *puthi-pora* repertoire. Nevertheless, I tentatively propose that although the *puthi*-literature contains a variety of different genres and compositional forms, the *puthi-pora* repertoire consists only of content that can be ‘read’. It is clear that this includes the mainstream narrative *puthis*, such as *Halotun Nobi*, *Mohobbot Nama*, and *Jongo Nama*, and it follows that it cannot include the lyrical songs of the esoteric *puthis* (as these are perceived to be ‘sung’ not ‘read’). What is not so clear is how to define the performance of a *puthi* that contains didactic sections as well as songs (for example, a *rag-poṇar* pair). This is an area for future research. Distinguishing between ‘read’ and ‘sung’ content in *puthi-pora* is not an attempt to distinguish between non-musical and musical performance. As we shall see in the next chapter, *puthi-pora*, while emically defined as book or manuscript *reading*, nevertheless involves reading *melodically*.

## ‘Reading Melodically’: An Analysis of *Poyar* and *Tripodī* Tunes

*Music is directed, not to the senses, but through  
the senses and to the mind.*  
Leonard Meyer<sup>1</sup>

During an interview with Sayed Mustafa Kamal,<sup>2</sup> Mir Shah Alom<sup>3</sup> instructed Kamal to read an example from *Halotun Nobī* ‘melodically’ (*‘sur kori poren’*). Kamal had read a previous example from a different *puthi* without using a tune, and these are the words Alom chooses to rectify this. It is significant (in the light of the emic distinction made between ‘reading’ and ‘singing’ in the previous chapter) that Alom does not ask Kamal to ‘sing’; instead he qualifies the *kind* of ‘reading’ he wants to hear. But what does ‘reading melodically’ mean, etically? What was Alom *actually* asking Kamal to do? Similar questions were raised in chapter 1. Goswami (2000:862) posits an answer by redefining ‘reading’—in the context of *puthi-pora*—as, ‘in fact a form of singing’ or as ‘a kind of repetitive chanting of a single melody that consists of only three or four notes and simple rhythms.’ Goswami’s reluctance to state that *puthi-pora* is in fact ‘singing’ (apart from his own emic perspective of course), surely stems from his analysis of *puthi* melody as musically simplistic. Dunham (1997:49) appears to agree with this when she compares *puthi-pora* to ‘less musically orientated’ *jarigan* compositions. One of the aims of this chapter, in attempting to answer the question of what ‘reading melodically’ means, etically, is to challenge these kinds of views; views which undermine the status of *puthi-pora* as a musical tradition.

The main aim of the chapter, however, is encapsulated in the other question, in seeking to understand what Alom was *actually* asking Kamal to do when he instructed

<sup>1</sup> From Leonard B. Meyer’s *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, used as an epigraph for the chapter ‘Perception’ in *Thinking about Music* by Lewis Rowell (1984:129).

<sup>2</sup> Private interview conducted on December 13, 2002, Sylhet (referred to in the previous chapter).

<sup>3</sup> Mir Shah Alom, Assistant Regional Director of Bangladesh Betar (Radio) in Sylhet, was the man who conducted the interview.

him to 'read melodically'. Did Alom mean, 'read *the* tune' for *Halotun Nobi*, or 'read a tune'?<sup>4</sup> Goswami's reference to a 'single melody' could be interpreted either way—a specific tune for a specific *puthi*, or, simply, one tune per *puthi*.<sup>5</sup> Most *puthi*-readers suggested the correctness of the former interpretation, by asserting that specific *puthis* should be read with specific tunes. Yet this was not meant in the singular. The number of specific tunes per *puthi* was said to match the number of poetic metres used in their composition.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, because *Mohobbot Nama* consists only of *poyar* and *tripodī* sections, for example, it uses just two tunes when it is read, one for each metre. It was further claimed that the tunes from one *puthi* cannot be used in the reading of another *puthi*. Or, even if it is practically possible to do so, it should not be done.<sup>7</sup> But how do the *puthi*-readers know which tune to read with which *puthi*? And how are the tunes produced? Are they created (constructed/reconstructed) in the process of performance, or predetermined, prescribed (in the *puthi* or elsewhere), and learned?

It is clear that while *puthi*-texts are read as written and passed on as physical objects, their tunes are a part of the oral realm. Unlike other South Asian manuscripts which contain songs (like those used by temple singers in Bhaktapur, Nepal) in which one would expect to find melodic (*raga*) and rhythmic (*tala*) instructions (Widdess 2007:14), no musical information is given in the narrative *puthis* at all.<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that a *puthi*-reader is free to use whatever tune he or she wants to use, however, as this would be inconsistent with the assertion that each *puthi*, and each poetic metre within each *puthi*, has its own specific tune that differs from *puthi* to *puthi*. These tunes are learned, generally from older relatives, but through a process of observation and imitation, rather than from explicit teaching. But what is learned and how is it retained? Memory is obviously involved, but not in the way that musicologist Leo Treitler (1974:344) expresses a common misconception: 'We say that the singer [the reader] has memorized a melody as though we might be saying that he had swallowed a score.' The idea that 'things are committed to memory whole, and there they lie

<sup>4</sup> Bengali does not require the use of definite or indefinite articles, so it could mean either.

<sup>5</sup> As noted in chapter 1, this reference to a 'single melody' could also mean one tune for all *puthis*.

<sup>6</sup> This, of course, is referring to the narrative-based rather than song-based *puthis*.

<sup>7</sup> When the question was put to Montazil Ali about the possibility of using the tune from one *puthi* with another *puthi* (in reference to *Halotun Nobi*), he responded that it could be done (that is, it would be practically possible) but that it would not be 'in accordance with Islam'.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that this is also the case in the versions of *Podmo-Puran* I have seen. This may justify Dunham's (1997:49) contention that the *puthi*-literature was composed not 'with a tune in mind' but in 'isolation'. This she states as a contrast to the composition of *jarigan* poetry.

fixed and lifeless until they are retrieved whole', not only tells us very little of the mechanisms of oral transmission, it is also at odds with what we know about the processes of cognition, in which 'remembering is a process not of reproduction but of reconstruction.'<sup>9</sup> If this is so, for each *puthi*, and each poetic metre within each *puthi*, the *puthi*-reader must have 'something' from which to reconstruct. This something is 'an abstract memory framework' (Snyder 2000:95); in other words, a 'schema'.

In chapter 2, I used the schema concept in my analysis of the *puthi-pora* event as a whole. Here, I seek to use it as an analytical tool in order to realise the two stated aims above: to define what 'reading melodically' is etically, and to consider whether specific *puthis* are read with specific tunes by different *puthi*-readers, as it is claimed. In order to do this, I have selected three *poyar* tunes and three *tripodī* tunes read by different *puthi*-readers from three of the narrative Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*: *Jongo Nama*, *Mohobbot Nama*, and *Halotun Nobi*, the three *puthis* I 'happened upon' most often during my fieldwork (as mentioned, and discussed, in the previous chapter). For each *poyar* and *tripodī* example, I have attempted to reconstruct a generalised abstract model of what each performer *may* have had in his mind as he came to read the *puthi*-text; their 'melodic schemas'. Before looking at any specific examples, it is necessary to look, first, at how the schema concept applies to melodic analysis in particular (in order to understand the relevance of using it here); and, second, at how I have created melodic schemas for melodic analysis (in order to understand the method).

### *The Relevance of the Schema Concept in Analysing Melody*

Schema theory describes the processes of human cognition in terms of perceptual and conceptual categorisation and abstract schematic frameworks; structures thought to be the primary bases of semantic memory (Snyder 2000:81, 96). With its roots in human cognition, schema theory has application to all areas of human experience. Different schemas relate to different kinds and levels of experience (as we have already seen in the analysis of performance context). How we perceive and understand music is just one area of human experience in which a whole hierarchy of schemas can be applied. 'On the highest level,' writes Snyder (2000:101-2), 'this would include many kinds of relatively stable musical forms or genres, such as symphony, raga, jazz improvisation

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<sup>9</sup> Treitler here references psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett and his 'classic of the field' *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, England, 1932; paperback reprint, 1972).

on chord changes, and variations.’ ‘On a lower level,’ he continues, ‘systematic and categorical aspects of music that relate to details of the music within particular pieces, such as tuning systems, metrical organization, [and] scales of duration, ...would also qualify as schemas.’ On a lower level still is melody.

Before considering melody, however, it is important to be aware of the ‘lower level’ schemas that will influence our melodic expectations; namely, *tuning systems*, *scales*, and *tonality*. Snyder (2000:135-6) describes these as follows: ‘A *tuning system* is an abstract generative system of intervals that defines basic interval categories and specifies details such as the size of the smallest allowable musical interval’; ‘A *scale* is a subset of the elements of a tuning system [usually adjusted to fit the limitations of short-term memory]’; ‘A *tonality* is a way of using a musical scale so that it seems to have a central pitch [while a scale may or may not have a centrally important pitch]’. He goes on (2000:153):

Note that tuning systems and scales are category structures that exist outside actual music: they are highly abstract sets of materials out of which music is made; they are part of a musical culture. But such categories have no time order—they tell us little about the actual ordering of events in real time. They give us expectations about what categories of events are likely to occur, but not when or in what order.

Because of their connection with musical cultures at a broad level, determining which scales are used in *puthi-pora*, and the tuning system that underpins them, will indicate to which musical culture the tradition belongs. In the light of everything we have seen so far, the expectation is surely that *puthi-pora* is part of Bengali musical culture (not least because *puthi-pora* is listed alongside other genres of Bengali music in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, as we saw in chapter 1). Nevertheless, this expectation needs to be proved.

Unlike tuning systems and scales, melodies *do* create expectations about when categories of events will occur, and in what order; for ‘melody’, writes Snyder (2000: 135), can be defined as ‘any sequence of acoustical events that contains recognizable patterns of contour (“highness” and “lowness”) in the time dimension with perceptible pitchlike intervals between successive events’. *Pitchlike intervals* and *contour* are key concepts which Snyder (2000:123-4, 136) explains and defines as follows: ‘A *pitched event*... [is] the smallest unit of organization in the melodic dimension’; ‘An *interval* is the melodic “distance” between two pitches’; ‘*Contour* is the metaphorical shape or outline of a melody created by the motion pattern of intervals.’ In order to stress their

importance, Snyder (2000:149) goes on to say: ‘Along with the qualities of particular intervals, contour is the main factor that gives melodies their recognizable individual melodic characteristics’. As these two ‘factors’ are essential to our understanding and expectations of melody, they will receive particular attention in the following analysis of *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes and must, therefore, be clearly visible in the creation of the ‘melodic schemas’ used to represent them.

### *A Method of Creating Melodic Schemas for Melodic Analysis*

Snyder (2000:153) says that ‘the analysis of melody in schematic terms is a relatively new field,’ but he does not provide concrete examples of how this is done, nor does he outline a method for creating melodic schemas for melodic analysis. In the absence of an established method, my attempt to reconstruct generalised abstract models, of what the readers *may* have had in their minds when using *pojar* or *tripodī* tunes in reading their *puthi*-texts, is, inevitably, experimental and for the purpose of achieving specific aims. Nevertheless, if their usage is successful in achieving these aims, it will provide a concrete example of how the schema concept can be used in melodic analysis more generally, and a tangible method for creating the schemas to do so.

In order to explain the method, I will take the first example, a *pojar* tune from *Jongo Nama* read by Abdul Lotif, and describe and demonstrate the process by which I created his melodic schema. The first stage involved transcribing and notating Abdul Lotif’s reading of the *pojar* section from the audio recording (CD/P1),<sup>10</sup> which I did in its entirety. A preliminary analysis showed there to be two melodic phrases, A and B, which corresponded, on the whole, to the two lines of the *pojar* couplet. Figure 5.1 (below) shows text lines 3 to 24 arranged vertically under one of these two phrases.<sup>11</sup> Because Abdul Lotif pauses at the end of line 3 (after the first textual line of the *pojar* couplet),<sup>12</sup> then continues to read by merging lines 4 and 5 before pausing again at the end of line 5, I decided to designate lines 3 and 5, and thereafter all odd numbered

<sup>10</sup> This audio recording, along with the audio recordings of every example considered in this chapter, is found on the CD in the pocket attached to the inside back cover of this thesis. In the example CD/P1, CD indicates that the audio example can be found on the CD, P1 indicates that this is the first *pojar* example (*tripodī* examples begin with T, e.g. T1).

<sup>11</sup> The idea of arranging melodic lines vertically, in order to compare their component parts, was taken from Treitler (1974:348-9), in his analysis of plainchant.

<sup>12</sup> For the sake of consistency, I have numbered every line on each *puthi* page with the first text line numbered as line 1 rather than beginning each section of the *puthi* with the number 1.

Figure 5.1: Demonstrating the process of creating a melodic schema

[illegible]

lines, B, and all even numbered lines as A. Phrases A and B are separated in the figure by a double bar line.

Within each A and B phrase there are some elements (or categories) that are stable (common to all phrases) and some which vary. I have attempted to signify this in Figure 5.1 by dividing the two phrases into four component parts (or category slots) separated by dashed bar lines. These category slots should be understood structurally. The second and fourth category slots in both melodic phrases are stable (*Bb* and *F* in phrase A, and the two *G*s in phrase B) while the first and third category slots represent variations.<sup>13</sup> These variations have been labelled 'a' and 'b'. I have aligned all the 'a' variations to the right of category slots one and three, and all the 'b' variations to the left (see the bottom two staves). The main reason for dividing the material in this way is to represent these variations clearly.

The bottom two lines of Figure 5.1 show the melodic outline of phrases A and B, represented as single black note-heads without their rhythmic stems. Where notes are repeated more than once in succession, only one note is represented (e.g. only one *Bb* note-head is represented for the second category slot in phrase A although the even-numbered lines from 4 to 24 show anything from one to five occurrences of the note). Outlining the notes in this way simplifies the structure for analysis, clearly showing the pitch and interval categories that comprise the melodic contour. The note heads in brackets indicate notes that do not occur in every phrase. For example, in A1, *G* only occurs twice (lines 4 and 16). Therefore, while it represents an alternative ('a') to the *C-D-C* combination ('b'), because it is not represented in every alternate line (lines 10 and 22 beginning on the *Bb* of the second category slot), it is shown in brackets. Similarly, because the notes in the *C-D-C* combination do not occur in that arrangement every time (lines 6, 8, 12, 14 and 18 do, but lines 20 and 24 only repeats the *C*), the *C* and *D* are bracketed together as they either occur together or not at all. Because the initial *C* occurs in all 'b' variation lines in phrase A, it is represented without brackets as a stable note-head.

The bottom two lines of Figure 5.1, then, show in outline form melodic phrases A and B and their variations ('a' and 'b'). This is not the melodic schema, but it is the basis for creating it. I say this for one simple reason—the outline represents one out of six pages of the example, just 22 lines or 12 *pojar* couplets. Comparing the

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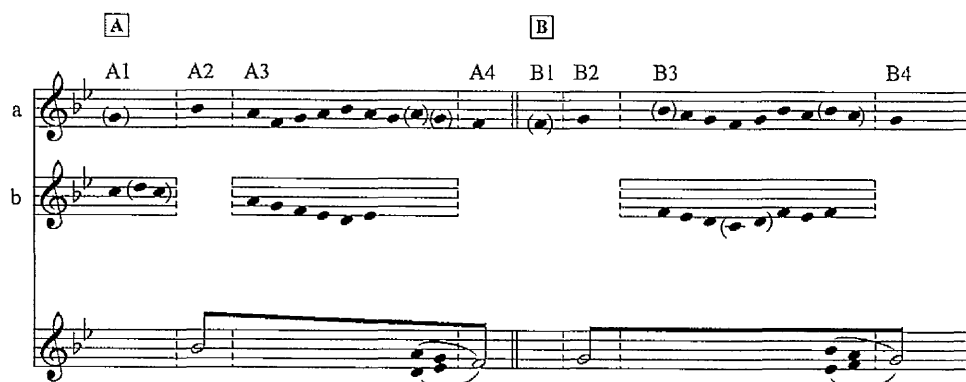
<sup>13</sup> B1 is the exception as the single note, *F*, is not common to all B phrases; it is therefore distinguished from B2 and the *G* which is.



outline with the rest of the transcribed example highlights other variations. In A3, variation 'b', the middle *C* and following *D* only appear once in sixteen occurrences (line 14). Similarly, the first *D* in B3, variation 'b', is also seen once in forty-six occurrences (line 3). Because they only appear once, these notes cannot be understood as typical and will therefore be excluded from the schema. The same is true of the bracketed *F* and *G* at the beginning of B3, variation 'b' (line 21). Although these notes do appear more than once, their paucity suggests that they are not schematically significant. This is also true for a number of other variations that occur within the performance.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to reiterate that it is not the purpose of a schema to incorporate all the details of an event. A schema is a '*general model* of the ordering of events in time' (Snyder 2000:153, emphasis mine). As a general model, a schema is based on what similar situations have *in common*. Since no two situations are ever exactly the same, a schema must be flexible enough to incorporate a certain amount of variation within a general framework. The same applies in performance. It is not the purpose of a melodic schema to represent every possible melodic variation or sequence of notes throughout an entire performance (it is not a transcription). For example P1, I have represented this general model—its melodic schema—in Figure 5.2 below.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 5.2: Melodic Schema for Jonggo Nama Poyar: Abdul Lotif



<sup>14</sup> Deciding on what is and what is not schematically significant requires some interpretation and is therefore by no means foolproof. The decisions I have made to include or discount certain notes, I have done on the basis of their frequency of occurrence in certain phrases or category slots in the examples I have. In order to be fully convinced of the schema of a particular tune, it would be necessary to compare different performances. This, however, was often not possible.

<sup>15</sup> I acknowledge indebtedness to my supervisor, Professor Richard Widdess, for helping me to devise this model.

As in Figure 5.1, I have divided melodic phrases A and B in Figure 5.2 with a double bar line. Each category slot within each phrase is also divided again by dashed bar lines, numbered in the schema A1 to A4 and B1 to B4. Variations ‘a’ and ‘b’ are represented on the top two staves. A2 and A4 and B2 and B4 are the stable category slots through which the melodic progression in phrases A and B moves respectively. This is represented by the Schenker-style reduction on the bottom staff; the minim notes depict their structural significance and the stem-less, black note-heads indicate the direction through which A3a, A3b, B3a, and B3b arrive at the final note of their respective phrases. As there are no ‘b’ variations of category slots A2, A4, B1, B2, and B4, these slots on staff ‘b’ have been erased. This helps to demonstrate, visually, that while Abdul Lotif has a choice of beginning phrase A with either A1a or A1b (for example), he must go through *Bb* in A2, choosing either A3a or A3b, before having to end the phrase on the *F* in A4. Apart from a few insignificant variations, Figure 5.2 is representative of Abdul Lotif’s reading of the whole *poyar boyan*; it is also a ‘general model’ for all of the other *poyar* sections he read from *Jongo Nama*. In both format, and in the process by which it was created, Figure 5.2 is also typical of all of the other *poyar* and *tripodī* schemas created for analysis in this chapter. The analysis will begin with a consideration of the melodic schemas used in the reading of *Jongo Nama*.

### ***Boro Jongo Nama: ‘Account of the Great War’***

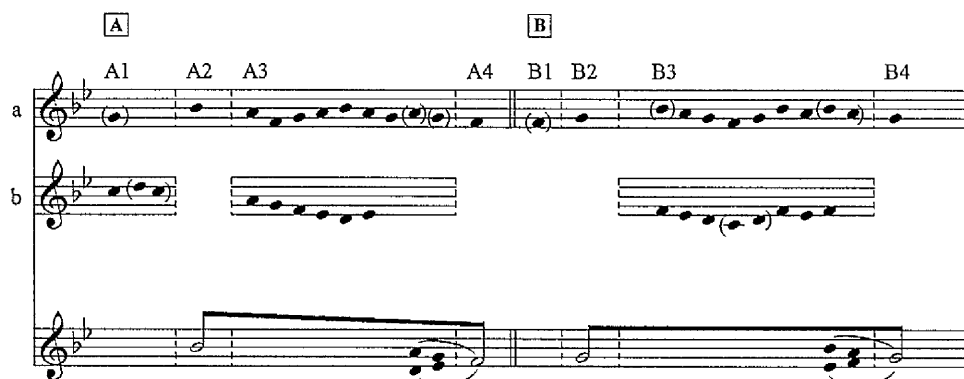
Comprising some 460 pages, *Boro Jongo Nama* is the longest of all the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*. At least four-fifths of the narrative is composed using *poyar* metre; the other fifth is a combination of *tripodī boyans* and *jarī* songs. Although there is a significant number of *jarī* songs (at least 30, compared with the 7 or so *tripodī boyans*), because the focus of analysis in this chapter, as a whole, is comparing *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes, the tunes used in the singing of these *jarī* songs will not be considered.<sup>16</sup> We will look instead at three *poyar* tunes read by Abdul Lotif, Abdul Korim, and Montazil Ali, and two *tripodī* tunes read by Abdul Korim and Montazil Ali (unfortunately, I do not have a *tripodī* example read by Abdul Lotif or by another reader). We will start with Abdul Lotif’s *poyar* tune.

<sup>16</sup> In addition, Dunham’s (1997) analysis of *jarīgan* tunes in her book is extensive.

### Example P1: Abdul Lotif's Poyar (CD/P1)

Abdul Lotif's *poyar* tune is schematised in Figure 5.2. Here we see interval categories equivalent to major and minor seconds, major and minor thirds, and a perfect fourth.<sup>17</sup> While the pitch range operates largely within an octave, it occasionally stretches to a major ninth. All nine pitches are used. In conjunction with the interval categories, this indicates the use of a tuning system based on twelve-semitones.

Figure 5.2: Melodic Schema for Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Lotif<sup>18</sup>



As far as tonality is concerned, an analysis of the structure of the whole of Abdul Lotif's performance of this *boyan* shows *F* to be the initial and final note of the melody (A4), as well as its tonal centre. This is strongly emphasised by the use of two melodic contours—a series of melodic arches (A1a/A1b>A2>A3a>A4||B1>B2>B3a>B4), in which the melody does not fall below *F*, but ascends from, and descends to, *F*; and an axial contour (A1a/A1b>A2>A3b>A4||B1>B2>B3b>B4), in which the motion rises above, and falls below *F*. At the highest point of the axis, the interval created above *F* is a major sixth (*D* in A1b); below *F*, the interval is a perfect fourth (*C* in B3b).<sup>19</sup> Of the two, the melodic arch is the more dominant contour. If *F* is understood as the tonal centre of this *poyar* tune, the scale in operation is the equivalent of *F*

<sup>17</sup> I say equivalent because neither the pitches nor the intervals can be considered precise in terms of their exact frequencies. Because *puthi-pora* is a monophonic tradition it does not incorporate any kind of instrumentation in performance (melodic or rhythmic), therefore the reader has no other musical point of reference. Fatigue or excitement often leads to a gradual departure from an initial starting pitch and a general lowering or rising of the pitch of the whole melody. This often happens progressively, though, so while the pitch frequencies are not always consistent, the interval categories remain, from pitch to pitch, relatively constant.

<sup>18</sup> Note that this figure reproduces Figure 5.2 from p.181.

<sup>19</sup> Snyder (2000:154) notes that while the rising and falling motion through a central pitch perfectly balance each other in an axial melody, the rising motion tends to be predominate.

major with a flattened seventh (or the Mixolydian mode). This particular scale, or pattern of notes (TTSTTST),<sup>20</sup> is known in Bengali music as *khamaj*.

According to Saaduddin (1980:112), diatonic scales are common in traditional Bengali music, particularly *khamaj*, for which 'there is a definite predilection'. While 'the use of the term might imply that these melodies are based on the raga *khamāj*,' he says, 'traditional Bengali melodies do not follow raga rules at all despite the similarity in the scale.' This is particularly evident in 'the characteristic ascending movement of a minor 3rd in Bengali melodies from the second degree of the scale to the fourth' that 'is not generally found in raga *khamāj*.' Indeed, in the classical raga, 'Re [the second degree of the scale] is weak and usually omitted in ascent' (Bor, ed. 1999:100). What we see in Figure 5.2, strongly suggests that Abdul Lotif is using the Bengali *khamaj* in the reading of this *pojar*. Not only is the scale the same, but both the second, *G* (A1a, B2, and B4), and the fourth, *Bb* (A2), are prominent, as is the upward leap of a minor third between them (A1a-A2, B2-B3a, and B3a). Other notable pitches include *C*, the fifth (A1b), which is emphasised as the principal starting note of phrase A. Also, there are two other intervallic leaps which seem characteristic of this tune: an upward leap of a minor third between the sixth and the tonic, *D-F* (B3b), and a downward leap of a major third between the third and the tonic, *A-F* (A3a). Generally though, the melodic motion is step-wise.

In terms of the division of melodic material, Figure 5.2 clearly shows there to be two distinct melodic phrases, A and B. As mentioned above, the category slots in the schema are structural. Therefore, the progression from *Bb* to *F* in phrase A (A2-A4) is a structural progression, as is *G* to *G* in phrase B (B2-B4). While there is some variation within each phrase it does not affect their structures. There does not appear to be any specific pattern to Abdul Lotif's use of the variations either. *F* is established as the final note of phrase A both by ascending and descending cadences (A3b and A3a) as is *G* in phrase B (B3b and B3a). If *F* is the tonal centre of this tune, phrase A may be said to have a 'closed' (or, resolved) ending, while phrase B, ending on *G*, the second degree of the scale, has an 'open' (or unresolved) one. Apart from the first and last lines of the *boyan*, and a few final lines at page turns in between (pp. 133, 136,

<sup>20</sup> 'T' refers to a 'whole tone'; 'S' refers to a 'semitone' (e.g. *F-G* [T], *G-A* [T], *A-Bb* [S], *Bb-C* [T], *C-D* [T], *D-Eb* [S], *Eb-F* [T]).

and 137), phrases A and B are read as a continuous melodic line with a pause after the G at the end of phrase B.

The melodic structure of the *pojar* tune throughout the *boyan*, then, operates on the basis of the pattern: B, AB, AB, AB, ...A. This creates a striking asymmetry with the poetic structure and rhyme scheme of the *pojar* couplet (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Asymmetry of melodic and poetic structures (Abdul Lotif)

Text Line	Jongo Nama Poyar (p.133) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
3	ହୋଥାଏ କୁଫାର ରାହା ଭୁଲିଆ ଇମାମ ॥ hothae kufar raha bhulia imam ॥	A/a	B	G (pause)
4	ଆଶିଆ ପୁସିଲା ଶାହା କର୍ବୋଳା ମୁକାମ* ashia pousila shaha korbola mukam*	B/a	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)
5	ଶେଇ ଦିନ ମୋହରମେ ଚନ୍ଦର ଦିଆ ॥ shei din mohoromer cander ditia ॥	A/b	B	G (pause)
6	ଆନାଲୋ ଆଲାତା ଶୋହିଦ ଲାଗିଆ* Anailo allatala shohid lagia*	B/b	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)
7	ଆରେ ଦିଶେ ଶାତ ରୁଜ ଲୁକ ଜନ ନାହି ॥ are dige shat ruj luk jon nai ॥	A/c	B	G (pause)
8	ଆର ଶୋହିତେ ଶାହା ଗେଲା ଶେଇ ଥାହି* iar shohite shaha gela shei thai*	B/c	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)
9	ହାଟିତେ ନା ପାରେ ତାନ ଶୋଆର ଗୁରା ॥ hatite na pare tan soearir ghura ॥	A/d	B	G (pause)
10	ହାଟୁ ମୋ ପାତରରେ ପାଉଁ ଗେଲା ମାତା* hatu tok pattorete pao gelo gara*	B/d	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)

Abdul Lotif begins this *boyan* with an exclamatory 'Allah' (F, A4) followed by text line 3 read with melodic phrase B (B1>B2>B3b>B4).<sup>21</sup> After this he pauses. Because he pauses in the middle of the couplet, and because phrase B has a melodically open ending (G, B4), Abdul Lotif creates a simultaneous poetic and melodic tension. The expectation generated is that this tension will be resolved at the end of following line (line 4): melodically, with another pause at the end of phrase A to establish the tonic (F, A4); poetically, by establishing the rhyme scheme of the couplet (imam-mukam). This expectation is not realised, however. Instead, Abdul Lotif reads lines 4 and 5 as a continuous melodic line (A1a>A2>A3a>A4||B1>B2>B3b>B4) using the exclamation 'Allah' as a link between the two phrases. He pauses again at the end of line 5, in the middle of the next *pojar* couplet, creating yet another

<sup>21</sup> 'Allah' is not written in the *puthi*-text but the exclamation is typically found in songs that bear this textual theme.

instance of melodic and poetic tension. Of course, both poetic and melodic tensions are resolved at the end of phrase A, but only momentarily. Apart from the few exceptions already mentioned, this is the pattern Abdul Lotif maintains throughout this *boyan*. Ultimate resolution comes only at the end of the final line of the *poyar boyan* (line 16, p.138 of the *puthi*).

So, *why* does Abdul Lotif do this? *Why* does he intentionally create poetic and melodic tension instead of opting for couplet-by-couplet resolution? Bearing in mind that *Jongo Nama* is the longest Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* (and that the bulk of the narrative consists of *poyar* metre), it would appear that Abdul Lotif's breaking up of the poetic and melodic structure is a deliberate ploy to generate momentum in performance. This helps, no doubt, in maintaining audience interest over sections of narrative which are often very long. But is this a typical feature of the reading of all *Jongo Nama poyars*? To answer this question, and to determine whether the tune used by Abdul Lotif is the same tune other readers use in *Jongo Nama poyar boyans*, we turn to compare it next with Abdul Korim's.

#### *Example P2: Abdul Korim's Poyar (CD/P2)*

First, we must establish what is meant by 'the same tune'. Is it simply a case of having the same (general) melodic structure, pitch range, scale, and tonality? If so, Abdul Korim's *poyar* tune *is* the same as Abdul Lotif's (see Figure 5.3).<sup>22</sup> The same two melodic phrases (A and B) are represented with the same two variant lines ('a' and 'b'); their pitch ranges (a major ninth), scales (*khamaj*), and tonal centres (*F*), are also the same.

A closer look at phrases A and B, however, will reveal further similarities and differences (Figure 5.4, similarities are shown in red). Beginning with phrase A; A2 and A4 show the same stable category slots as the previous example (*Bb-F*). The A1 categories are almost exactly the same here as in P1 with the exception that A1b includes an occasional *G* at the beginning.<sup>23</sup> The characteristic upward leap of a minor third (*G-Bb*) between A1a and A2 in P1 is also evident here. A3a shows a similar contour, but it is more contracted here than in P1, often consisting of the alternation of

<sup>22</sup> Example P2 has been transposed up a minor third for easy comparison with example P1.

<sup>23</sup> *G* only occurs three times out of the twenty-one instances of A1b so it is hardly representative. Even though it occurs at the beginning of certain textual lines, it could perhaps be considered, melodically, an extension of B4b.

Figure 5.3: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P2: Abdul Korim

Figure 5.3 displays the melodic schema for P2: Abdul Korim. The notation is organized into three staves (a, b, and a lower staff). The top staff (a) contains the melodic phrases A and B, with notes labeled A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, B2, B3, B4, and B5. The middle staff (b) shows the corresponding notes for the lower staff. The lower staff shows a continuous melodic line with some notes bracketed, indicating a specific melodic progression.

P1: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.3 displays the melodic schema for P1: Abdul Lotif. The notation is organized into three staves (a, b, and a lower staff). The top staff (a) contains the melodic phrases A and B, with notes labeled A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, B2, B3, and B4. The middle staff (b) shows the corresponding notes for the lower staff. The lower staff shows a continuous melodic line with some notes bracketed, indicating a specific melodic progression.

just two notes (*A-G-A-G*), and at most, three (*A-G-F-G-A-G*). The downward leap of the major third (*A-F*) in A3a of P1 is absent here, filled in by *G* and creating, instead, a step-wise progression. A3b shows exactly the same progression of notes here as in P1, but in six of twelve occurrences, the bracketed notes are omitted altogether leaving another highly contracted form (*A-G*). In such instances, Abdul Korim repeats these two individual notes, and *F* (A4) in particular. This firmly establishes *F* as the tonic. A5 introduces a new category slot to the schema, but I will refer to its use below when considering B5.

Phrase B also consists of some similarities and differences from P1 (Figure 5.5). B1 contains the initial *F*, but with the addition of an occasional *D* (where used creating an upward intervallic leap [*D-F*] of a minor third). B2 is the only stable category slot of the phrase using the second degree of the scale as in P1. The contour of B3a is essentially the same across both examples, although again it is in more contracted form in P2. The minor third leap from *G* to *Bb* is not present between B2

Figure 5.4: Comparison of Phrase A in Jonggo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P2: Abdul Korim

Figure 5.4 shows the musical score for P2: Abdul Korim, Phrase A. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one flat. It consists of three staves: a vocal line (a), a piano accompaniment line (b), and a bass line. The vocal line is divided into two sections, A and B. Section A contains notes A1, A2, A3, A4, and A5. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, B4, and B5. The piano accompaniment and bass line provide harmonic support for the vocal melody.

P1: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.5 shows the musical score for P1: Abdul Lotif, Phrase A. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one flat. It consists of three staves: a vocal line (a), a piano accompaniment line (b), and a bass line. The vocal line is divided into two sections, A and B. Section A contains notes A1, A2, A3, and A4. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, and B4. The piano accompaniment and bass line provide harmonic support for the vocal melody.

Figure 5.5: Comparison of Phrase B in Jonggo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P2: Abdul Korim

Figure 5.6 shows the musical score for P2: Abdul Korim, Phrase B. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one flat. It consists of three staves: a vocal line (a), a piano accompaniment line (b), and a bass line. The vocal line is divided into two sections, A and B. Section A contains notes A1, A2, A3, A4, and A5. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, B4, and B5. The piano accompaniment and bass line provide harmonic support for the vocal melody.

P1: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.7 shows the musical score for P1: Abdul Lotif, Phrase B. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one flat. It consists of three staves: a vocal line (a), a piano accompaniment line (b), and a bass line. The vocal line is divided into two sections, A and B. Section A contains notes A1, A2, A3, and A4. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, and B4. The piano accompaniment and bass line provide harmonic support for the vocal melody.



and B3a, but it is represented occasionally within the category.<sup>24</sup> B3b again shows a similar contour to P1 and the same characteristic upward leap of a minor third. B4 in P2 represents the main schematic difference. While *G* is still used (B4b), *F* is also used (B4a) more than half the time. This, of course, helps to establish the tonal centre more clearly, but it consequentially fails to create the same level of tension and expectation that a pause on the second does. It also affects the penultimate notes in B3a and B3b, and therefore the cadential progression in phrase B. *A* is replaced by *G* in B3a (as B4a is preceded by B3a almost without exception) and the characteristic *D-F-Eb-F* combination leading up to *G* in P1 is replaced by *D-F-G-F*. In as much as it anticipates the final *G*, it is slightly anticlimactic.

A5 introduces a new category slot to phrase A as does B5 to phrase B. A5 is only ever used to connect phrases A and B when they are read together in continuous performance. Where Abdul Korim pauses at the end of phrase A—which he does multiple times in the *boyan*, in stark contrast to Abdul Lotif—he does so after A4, emphasising the tonic by repetition and prolongation. B5 (shown on the second line as it only ever follows B3b) only occurs four times in the whole example, and, when it does occur, it is only ever used as a device to connect two B phrase lines together in continuous performance.

Like example P1 there seems to be no particular pattern here to the choice of alternative structural categories used to create the melodic phrases. With the exception of lines 4, 12, 18, and 22 on p.91 of the *puthi* (which use the B5 category slot as a linking device to repeat the phrase), phrase B always concludes with a pause, creating poetic tension by allowing the melodic movement to run from A to B continuously, and dividing the textual lines of the *poyar* couplet (see Table 5.2). As mentioned above, however, the poetic tension is not always reinforced with melodic tension. A pause on the tonic (B4a), instead of on the second (B4b), for example, releases the tension. In addition, Abdul Korim pauses a number of times at the end of phrase A (nine out of twenty-seven), which also establishes the tonic and releases any poetic and melodic tension that may have been generated up to that point. The combination of phrases A and B in a single, continuous melodic line remains the most frequent, however (eighteen out of twenty-four). Phrase A is followed by phrase A once; phrase

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<sup>24</sup> The bracketed notes (*G-Bb-A*) indicate that they are not always performed.

B by phrase B four times. This creates both melodic arch contours and combined axial-arch contours, similar to those generated in P1.

Table 5.2: *Asymmetry of melodic and poetic structures (Abdul Korim)*

Text Line	Jongo Nama Poyar (p.89) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
9	ব্রতীদ শুনীত লেখা ভাবে মনে মন ॥ olid shunia lekha bhabbe mone <u>mon</u> ॥	A/a	B	G (pause)
10	বপে পাশত মদনন মানীরা দুই জন* bhoe paia mosrot korila dui <u>jon</u> *	B/a	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)
11	কুণীর তালশ বৈজ জাদুদ পাশীনা ॥ kuṇonir talash bhej jasus komina ॥	A/b	B	F (pause)
12	খুজীত পাশরা কুণী মাগেই গণেশনা* Khujia paila kuṇoni namete moemona*	B/b	A	F (expl. <sup>25</sup> )
13	গণেশনা মাগেই বুড়ী বড়শ কুণী ॥ moemona nameto buri boroi kuṇoni ॥	A/c	B	F (pause)
14	জগন তুলাই বুড়ী শেইত গণেশনী* jogoto tulae buri sheito moemoti*	B/c	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)
15	মাংগায়া লীত বুড়ী ব্রতীদা সন্দাদে ॥ maṅgaia lilo buri olida sordare ॥	A/d	B	G (pause)
16	কোহিল শোকল কথা বীবনীত তানে* kohilo shokol kotha bibria <u>tare</u> *	B/d	A 'Allah'	F (cont.)

While there are some obvious differences between examples P1 and P2, I think it is clear, from a comparison of their melodic features, that enough similarities exist to conclude that Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim are using the 'same tune' in their reading of *Jongo Nama poyar boyans*. Although their individual schemas show some slight differences, the melodic features are generally the same. In one sense, this is not surprising. Both readers come from the same *upozila* of Sylhet (Jointapur), and attend the same *puthi*-readings. In order to determine whether this tune is used more widely, however, we turn to consider Montazil Ali's *poyar*.

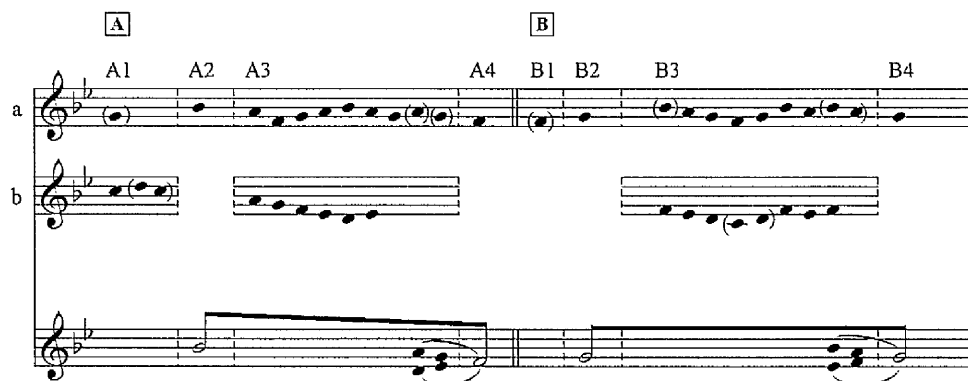
### Example P3: Montazil Ali's Poyar (CD/P3)

Montazil Ali is from a different *upozila* (Golabgonj) and, as far as I am aware, he has never met Abdul Lotif nor Abdul Korim. His tune is represented in schematic form in Figure 5.6.<sup>26</sup> The first thing to note about this example, in contrast to the other two, is

<sup>25</sup> This example was recorded during an interview with Abdul Korim on August 21, 2005. At this point in his reading, Abdul Korim stops to explain something about the prosody.

<sup>26</sup> Example P3 has been transposed down a minor second.





Variation 'b' is used consistently for the first couplet line; variation 'a' for the second. As *G* is the final note in both variations, both cadences are closed and thereby do not generate tension ('b' ascends to the tonic; 'a' descends to it). There is a sense, however, that the ending of variation 'a', with its descending cadence, is more final. This is due largely to the addition of an exclamatory '*i Allah*' which marks the end of every couplet. With a single phrase, and little option for melodic variation, the way in which Montazil Ali creates any kind of tension or expectation in the performance is by pausing briefly at different points in his reading. While there is no definite pattern to this, he paused mainly after three lines of text (fifteen out of twenty-three times), and only occasionally after one, two, or four lines. The result, particularly the pause after three textual lines (see Table 5.3), is a small amount of poetic tension (as the pause occurs in the middle of the couplet), which is reinforced by the descending cadence of variation 'a'.

Having noted the differences, the reason I have labelled this melodic phrase B is because it does show some similarity to phrase B of examples P1 and P2 (Figure 5.7). The structural progression in all three examples is from *G* to *G*, with the partial exception of B4a in P2. The initial upward leap from *G* to *Bb* (B1-B2) is shared with P2. The descent to *D*, followed by the upward leap of a minor third to *F* (B2-B3), is characteristic of P1 and P2 (B3b, although *A-G* of the descent is only found in P2).<sup>27</sup> The cadential *D-F-E-F* combination (B2-B3b) is the same as in P1 (B3b), although here the *E* is natural. The upward leap of a minor third from *G-Bb* (B3a) and its cadential descent to *G* is common to all.

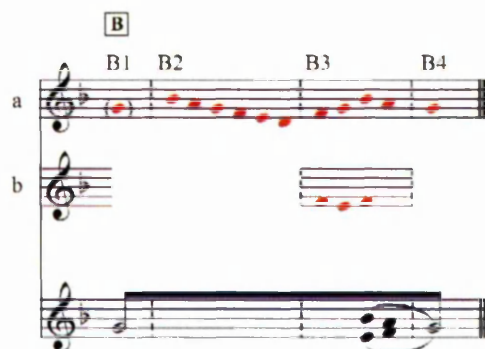
<sup>27</sup> The descent to *D* from *Bb* is also a feature of category combinations A2-A3b in P1 and P2.

Table 5.3: Use of Irregular Pausing (Montazil Ali)

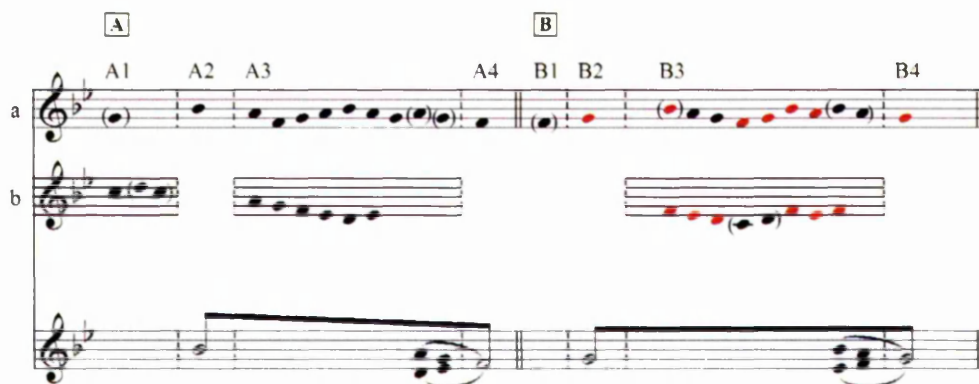
Text Line	Jongo Nama Poyar (p.437) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
1	शौनम शेना वीन शव द्वाशता शौनान ॥ shoinon shena bir shob hoila shonhar ॥	A/a	'b'	G (cont.)
2	बापती शानन प्हीनी ना बापे नशपे प्तामीप्फान * baki matro phiri na cae bhoie haniphar *	B/a	'a' 'i Allah'	G (cont.)
3	पे पान्ना सुनीन प्तापी जुपानी पौन शान ॥ e kotha shunia papi jukti koilo shar ॥	A/a	'b'	G (pause)
4	शौनम शेनागम डापती पानीन शानन * shoinon shenagon daki korilo shomar *	B/a	'a' 'i Allah'	G (cont.)
5	पान्नापे प्तामीप्फा बुते नाश बन्दुगम ॥ hotae hanipha bule bhai bondugon ॥	A/b	'b'	G (cont.)
6	बन्दुगमीने बेरी पान दामिशोक भुवम * Coturobhte beri dhoro damishok bhubon *	B/b	'a' 'i Allah'	G (pause)
7	इबनाप्रीश द्वापानीने जार जवनीजेन इशशर ॥ Ibrahim dokkhine jao tobrijer ishshor ॥	A/c	'b'	G (cont.)
8	शौगे पानी नौन जार प्तामीप्फ पानन * shonge kori loa jao hariso kuor *	B/c	'a' 'i Allah'	G (cont.)

Figure 5.7: Comparison of Phrase B in Jongo Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali with Abdul Korim and Abdul Lotif

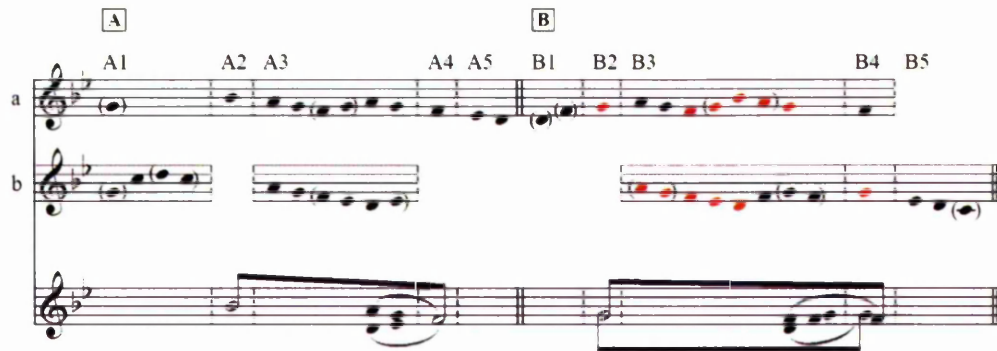
P3: Montazil Ali



P2: Abdul Korim



P1: Abdul Lotif



So on the basis of these similarities, is there enough evidence to conclude that example P3 is essentially the same basic tune as examples P1 and P2, or at least a part of it? Or, are the differences significant enough to conclude that example P3 is, in actual fact, a distinct melody with a different schema? If melodic structure, pitch range, scale and tonality are criteria, we would have to say that P3 is a different tune, for Montazil Ali uses a single melodic phrase (not two), a smaller pitch range (a minor sixth rather than a major ninth), and a different scale (*kaphi* instead of *khamaj*) with another tonal centre (*G* rather than *F*). The similarities between phrase B of P3 and phrase B of the other two examples, however, suggest that these factors alone are not conclusive.

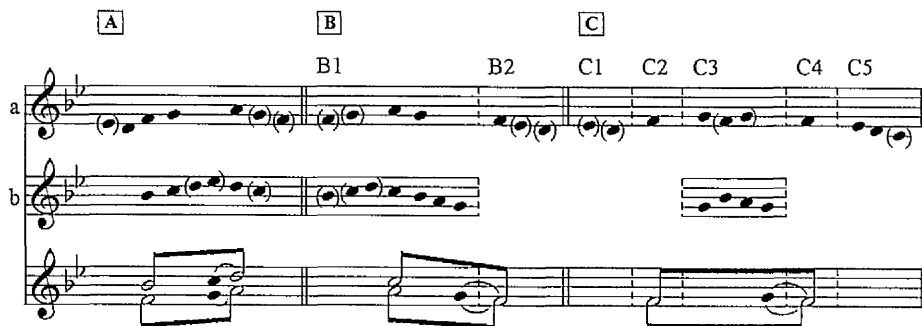
It is certainly plausible that the schema Montazil Ali learned is connected with those learned by Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim—that there exists a more generalised schema, perhaps, that each reader has adapted to form his own individualised schema; or that the schema and its associated tunes have changed through their transmission in various geographical areas. Many more examples than could practically be considered in this chapter are necessary, however, before conclusions of this kind can be drawn. Nonetheless, it is something to keep in mind as we consider the tunes used in different *puthis*. First, though, we turn to look at the tunes Abdul Korim and Montazil Ali used in reading *tripodī boyans* from *Jongo Nama*. These will be compared with each other and with their individual *pojar* tunes.

*Example T1: Abdul Korim's Tripodī (CD/T1)*

Abdul Korim's *tripodī* tune<sup>28</sup> is melodically related to his *poyar* (Figure 5.8). Both tunes exhibit the use of the same scale (*khamaj*) and the same tonic (*F*). In terms of pitch range, the two tunes are almost exactly the same: *C* is the lowest note in both (*C5*; cf. *B5*, *P2*); *E<sub>b</sub>* is the highest (*A' b'*), just a semitone higher than *D* in *P2* (*A1b*). The overall pitch range in *T1* is a minor tenth (rather than a major ninth). It is the structure of these two tunes, however, that shows the greatest difference. Following the tripartite structure of the *tripodī* lines, I divided the melodic material into three phrases.

Figure 5.8: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Jongo Nama Tripodī and Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim

*T1: Abdul Korim*



*P2: Abdul Korim*

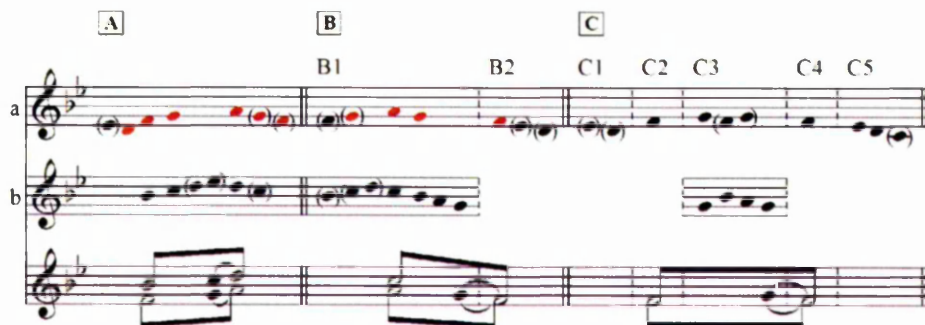


<sup>28</sup> Example T1 has been transcribed a fourth higher than at pitch, a tone higher than example P2 (which was transposed up a minor third). These two examples were not recorded one after the other without interruption, however, and it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the starting pitch shifted up a tone from the end of the *poyar* and *tripodī* examples (as can often happen within a single example). The reasons for transposing example T1 in the way described above will, I hope, become clear as we consider it. To aid comparison, his *poyar* tune, schematised in P2, is also included underneath.

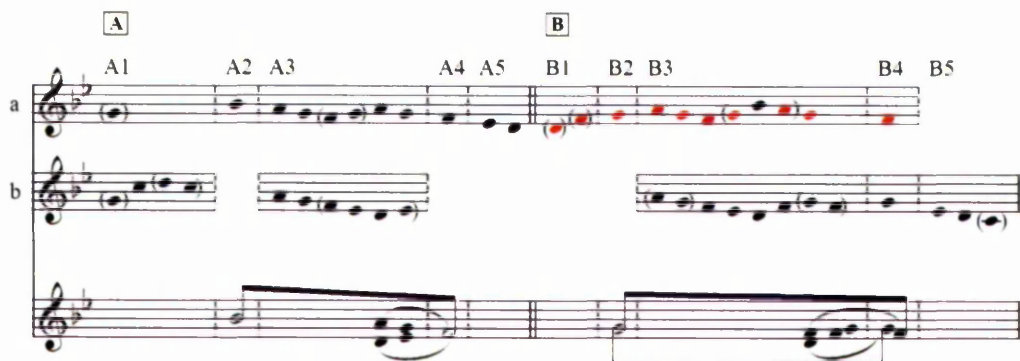
If we look in a bit more detail at the construction of the melodic phrases, we can identify an even closer relationship between the two tunes. In phrases A and B of variation line 'a' (Figure 5.9), the occasional *D-F* leap followed by *G* in phrase A is found in B1a-B2a in P2. The combination of notes *A-G-F-G-A-G-F* in phrases A-B is seen note for note in P2 (B3a-B4a; the same combination is also seen in A3a-A4a).

Figure 5.9: Comparison of Variation 'a' in Jongo Nama Tripodī and Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim

T1: Abdul Korim



P2: Abdul Korim



The links between the 'b' line variations of both tunes also reveal similarities (Figure 5.10). The run of notes in B1b-B2a of T1 (*C-D-C-Bb-A-G-F-Eb-D*) can be found in A1b-A2a-A3b of P2. Although phrase A'b' has its own arch contour, the notes *C-D-C* parallel A1b of P2, particularly if *D* and *Eb* are omitted from the former (as they are infrequently in the reading).

Phrase C of the *tripodī* also shows great similarity to phrase B of the *poyar* (Figure 5.11). C1-C2 again exhibits the *D-F* leap seen in B1 in P2. C3a, with its repetition on a single note (*G*) and occasional alternation between two notes (*G-F-G*),



Figure 5.10: Comparison of Variation 'b' in Jongo Nama Tripodī and Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim

T1: Abdul Korim



P2: Abdul Korim

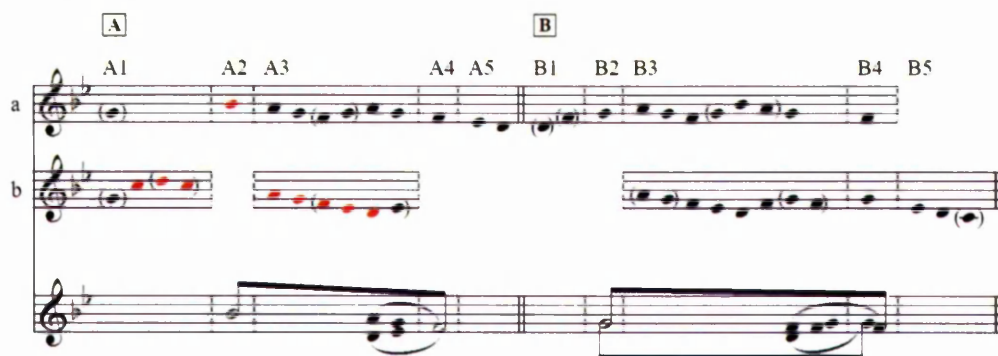
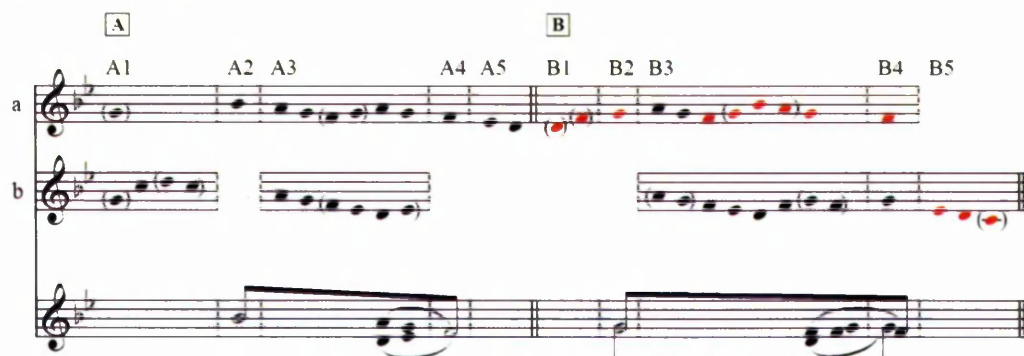


Figure 5.11: Comparison of Phrase C-B in Jongo Nama Tripodī and Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim

T1: Abdul Korim



P2: Abdul Korim



can find its place in B2a-B3a of P2. C3b, however, is a replication of the final four notes of B3a, as is C4 and C5 of B4a and B5b

Saying that the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes are melodically related is perhaps too weak. On the basis of these comparisons, it could be stated that Abdul Korim is using the same melodic material—or, schema—in the construction of both tunes. It could be stated even more strongly: that they *are* the same schema but have been adapted to fit each poetic metre.

As described in chapter 4, *tripodī* metre, like *pojar*, is essentially bipartite—constructed from two main lines whose endings rhyme with each other. Apart from the number of syllables in each line, the major difference is that *tripodī* lines are comprised of three distinct parts. The first two parts of the line end with the same rhyme; the ending of the third part, the last part of the line, rhymes with the ending of the last part of the second line (A/a, B/a, C/b; A/c, B/c, C/b). Table 5.4 below shows the text of the *tripodī* as it is written in the *puthi*: the first two parts of the first *tripodī* line on the first line (separated by a single dot and a double dot), the third part written underneath on the second (followed by a double vertical line); the first two parts of the second *tripodī* line on the third line (again separated by a single dot and a double dot), with the third part written underneath on the fourth (followed by a star). The dotted line (after lines 14 and 18) represents one completed line of the *tripodī*; the full line (after lines 16 and 20) indicates the completion of the whole. Alongside the text, Table 5.4 below shows the poetic and melodic structures and the final note of the melodic phrases.

The melodic structure of the *tripodī* tune throughout this *boyan* follows the general pattern: AB, C; AB, C; AB, C; etc.<sup>29</sup> While this is not true in every case (as it is occasionally A, B, C or ABC), it is by far the most common structure. This parallels the poetic structure of the *tripodī* presented in the *puthi* very well—the first two parts of the tripartite line written on the same line and performed as one melodic line (AB, followed by a pause), with the third part of the line written underneath on a separate line performed with a separate melodic phrase (C; followed by a pause).

Unlike the *pojar* tune that Abdul Korim uses in *Jongo Nama*, his *tripodī* tune is much more concurrent with the text. Not only do the melodic lines match the text lines as written in the *puthi*, but the final notes further establish the poetic structure by

<sup>29</sup> Here, the commas indicate a pause and the semi-colons indicate the end of a whole *tripodī* line.

Table 5.4: Comparison of melodic and poetic structures in Jongo Nama Tripodī (Abdul Korim)

Text Line	Jongo Nama Tripodī (p.97) Rhyme underlined (main rhyme in bold)	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
13	शुनोरे कासेमो बोली • शीताबी जावना बोलीः shunore kasemo boli • shitabi jaona coliः	A/a, B/a	A/a B/a (pause)	A, D
14	हुसोने जमना डामनी ॥ Husonere anoho <b>dakia</b> ॥	C/b	C (pause)	F
15	भाइको देखीज जावे • दादने बीदाए दावेः bhaike dekhia jave • Hasone bidae hobeः	A/c, B/c	A/b B/b (pause)	D, F
16	कीजमने द्रष्टन तामनी* kiamote sofor <b>lagia</b> *	C/b	C (pause)	F
17	कासेमो कांदीज जरे • बीजीज जंजीज जरेः kasemo kandia cole • bhijilo ankhir joleः	A/c, B/c	A/a (pause) B/a (pause)	F, D
18	शुनीज बापेन ऐइ पाना ॥ shunia baper ei <b>kotha</b> ॥	C/b	C (pause)	F
19	शुगेते फाहीज दानी • जान जान पामे तनीः shugete fatilo <b>sati</b> • jar jar kande <b>oti</b> ः	A/a, B/a	A/b B/b (pause)	C, D
20	जशरेम द्रष्टन नदो जेना* ailen Huson rohe <b>jetha</b> [je hai]*	C/b	C (pause)	F [C]

melodically paralleling their open and closed endings in the majority of instances. The internal rhyme scheme of each line—the rhyme between the ending of the first two parts of the tripartite line—is not reinforced particularly, giving primacy to the main rhyme which is the rhyme that occurs at the end of the third part of both *tripodī* lines (indicated by bold type in Table 5.4). Apart from the occasional pause (which divides the first two parts of the line), the melodic movement runs between A and B, pausing after the second part of the line. The bulk of these lines end on D (the sixth degree of the scale) creating a simultaneous poetically and melodically open ending.<sup>30</sup>

The main rhyme, in contrast, is generally paralleled by the closed ending of phrase C on the tonic (F, C4), emphasised by a repetition or prolongation of the tonic and often both. Text line 20 in Table 5.4 above shows that this is not always the case, however. The exclamation ‘*je hai*’ (‘Oh alas!’) is added to the end of this line and at the end of just over a third of C lines, almost exclusively after the second line which completes the *tripodī*. This exclamation, coupled with its melodic counterpart (C5), acts as a hinge to connect phrase C with phrase A. This is then followed by another textual insertion at the beginning of next the line (A1a), ‘*hai Allah*’ (‘Alas Allah!’).

<sup>30</sup> I have made F the stable note in category slot B4, despite the fact that D is by far the most common final note of phrase B, because F is used in every single occurrence (indicated by its un-bracketed note-head) whereas D is not. F, therefore, has greater structural continuity in B4.

While the ‘*je hai*’ exclamation removes the sense of melodic conclusion from the line (by descending from the closed ending of the tonic to an open ending, *D* or *C*), Abdul Korim still pauses at the end of the line and, in so doing, maintains the sense of poetic conclusion. Melodically, the ‘*hai Allah*’ insertion results in greater repetition of notes in category slot A1a, but does not have a specific melodic counterpart as does ‘*je hai*’. These exclamatory insertions are, like the ‘*i Allah*’ (‘Oh Allah!’) exclamation used in the *pojar*, characteristic of the *puthi*’s narrative theme. It is notable that they are not seen in the reading of the other two *puthis* considered in this chapter.

It was asked above, in respect to the use of *pojar* tunes in *Jongo Nama*, why the *puthi*-readers (particularly Abdul Lotif, but also Abdul Korim and Montazil Ali to a lesser degree) intentionally created poetic and melodic tension in their reading rather than opting for resolution. I suggested that because of the function of *pojar* metre—to generate long sections of narrative—the poetic and melodic tension helps to generate momentum in performance, which is particularly necessary in a long *puthi* like *Jongo Nama*. So, we might well ask: If this is the case with the *pojar boyans*, why does a reading of *tripodī boyans* not also show the same kind of asymmetry between poetic and melodic structures? Why is there, in contrast, a greater symmetry between them? The answer lies both in the function of *tripodī* as a metre, and how the *tripodī* metre is used in *Jongo Nama*. While *pojar* is the main narrative generating metre, *tripodī* allows for some reflection on that narrative. In addition, although *Jongo Nama* is one of the longest Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*, it only contains seven *tripodī boyans*, and none of them are longer than 5 pages. In the light of these things, there is not the same need to generate momentum in their performance.

We move on now to consider Montazil Ali’s *tripodī* tune from *Jongo Nama*. This tune will be compared with his *pojar* tune, and also with Abdul Korim’s *tripodī* tune above.

*Example T2: Montazil Ali's Tripodī (CD/T2)*

What is striking about Montazil Ali's *tripodī* tune<sup>31</sup> is its economy (Figure 5.12). Phrases A and B parallel the first two parts of the *tripodī* line (A and B) while the third part (phrase C) is comprised of phrases A and B together, with an extension of a couple of extra notes (B ext.). Similar to the previous example, phrases A and B could be said to form a single melodic line as there is no break between them in the performance. If so, Montazil Ali is essentially repeating just one melodic line. While this may be the case as far as the melodic contour is concerned (a clear melodic arch), individual notes are given more weight in phrases A and B than when they are combined (in forming C). This is particularly the case with the initial *G*, as it is (although less so) with the *Eb* of phrase A, and the *D* of phrase B.

In its economy of melodic material, Montazil Ali's *tripodī* schema contrasts with the schema used by Abdul Korim considered above (Figure 5.12). Although Abdul Korim also combines phrases A and B in his reading of the first two parts of the tripartite *tripodī* line, both phrases display independent melodic arch contours (if all the notes are used) in contrast to the single melodic arch contour of phrases A and B here. Abdul Korim's tune also has an independent melodic phrase C to match part C of the *tripodī* line (see Table 5.4). But, the contrast goes beyond even that. In his schema, Abdul Korim has the option of varying the melodic material with lines 'a' and 'b', which he does with some regularity, alternating between them (particularly in phrases A and B). So, while the melodic contour of Abdul Korim's *tripodī* tune remains essentially the same in both variations—a series of parallel melodic arches—the pitch differs between them (again, particularly in phrases A and B). Montazil Ali's schema is constructed from a single melodic arch performed at a single pitch.

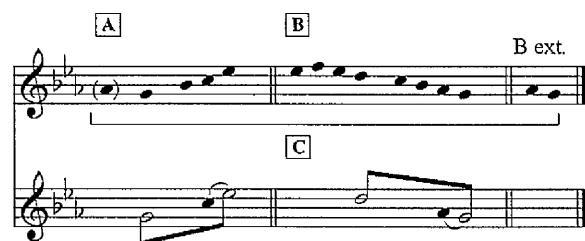
While Montazil Ali's schema contrasts with Abdul Korim's schema in terms of its economy of melodic material, it is similar to his *poṃar* in this particular respect (Figure 5.13). (As we shall see later, however, the schema he uses to construct his *poṃar* tune in *Jongo Nama* is not typical of the schemas he uses in the other two *puṃhis*.) His economic use of melodic material in his *tripodī* tune is also limited to

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<sup>31</sup> Example T2 has been transcribed at pitch. In terms of its overall pitch, however, it is a semitone lower than the *poṃar* example (P3). As with Abdul Korim's *tripodī*, this tune was also not recorded in direct succession of the *poṃar* tune. There was a break in between in which a few questions were asked, and so there is no reason to consider the semitone difference to be of any significance.

Figure 5.12: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Jongo Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali with Abdul Korim

T2: Montazil Ali



T1: Abdul Korim

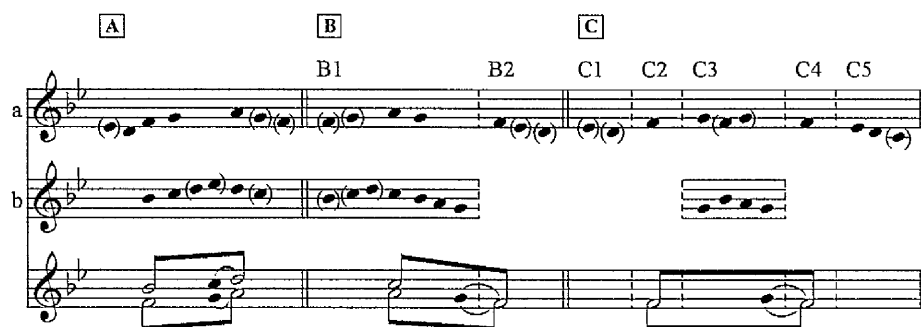
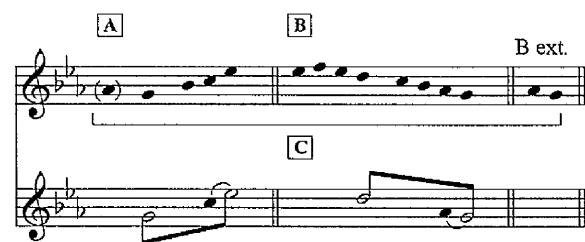
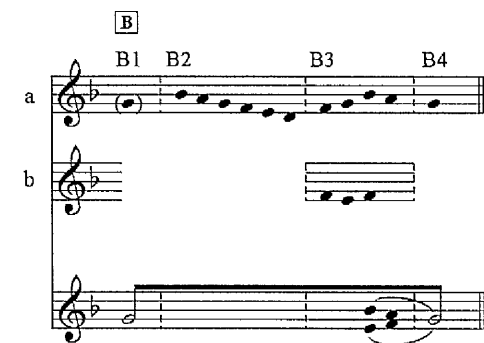


Figure 5.13: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Jongo Nama Tripodī and Jongo Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali

T2: Montazil Ali



P3: Montazil Ali



*Jongo Nama*. The reason for this may be, again, a pragmatic performance response to this particular *puthi*'s length.

Apart from this economic use of melodic material, there is not much similarity between Montazil Ali's *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes. *G* is the tonic of both, but the *tripodī* tune exhibits the use of a different scale to that used in his *pojar* (*kaphī*). Here, he uses a scale equivalent to *G* natural minor with a flattened 2nd, or the *G* Phrygian mode. This pattern of notes (STTTSTT) is also found in Bengali music, and is known as *bhairavi*. 'Songs based on the scale similar to the *bhairavī* raga...are not unusual', writes Saaduddin (1980:112), 'but whether the scale is indigenous or not remains uncertain.' Like *khamaj* and *kaphi*, *bhairavi* is used across India. Because the scale is used in Bengali music, though, it is further evidence of *puthi-poja*'s congruence with Bengali musical culture (which is, itself, a part of wider South Asian musical culture). *Bhairavi* is used in *jarīgan* songs, too, and Dunham (1997:138) states that it 'may be safely identified as mournful.' The use of this scale highlights the thematic-melodic link between *jarīgan* and *Jongo Nama* noted above in regard to Montazil Ali's *Jongo Nama pojara*. It is also worth restating, however, that to many *puthi*-readers, *tripodī* is synonymous with sorrow and lament. Montazil Ali's use of *bhairavi* for his *Jongo Nama tripodī* tune, then, is doubly appropriate.

But it is not just the scale that differentiates Montazil Ali's *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes. Although the pitch range is similar (a minor seventh here, a minor sixth in the *pojar*), the contours—and therefore the intervals created above and below the tonic—are completely different. Montazil Ali's *pojar* displays a clear axial melody, creating an interval of a minor third above the tonic and a fourth below. As noted above, his *tripodī* tune is constructed from a single melodic arch that rises from and descends to the tonic, but does not fall below it. The interval above the tonic, then, is the full pitch range, a minor seventh. Intervallic leaps in both tunes are made upwards and limited to minor thirds, while all descending movement is scalar and step-wise. In this respect they are similar.

We have already observed the contrast between Abdul Korim's and Montazil Ali's *tripodī* schemas in terms of Montazil Ali's economic use of melodic material. It should not escape notice that Montazil Ali's use of *bhairavi* in this *tripodī* tune is not only different from the scale he uses in his *pojar*, but that it also differs from the scale

Abdul Korim uses in his *tripodī* tune. The pitch range (of a minor seventh), also, is considerably smaller than Abdul Korim's minor tenth. We do see the same tendency in Abdul Korim's *tripodī*, however, for intervallic leaps to be limited to a minor third, and made upwards, and for the descending movement to be step-wise.

What similarities exist between these two *tripodī* tunes are found in their text-tune concurrency, but these are not strong. Montazil Ali and Abdul Korim both pause in the same places—after the first two parts of the tripartite *tripodī* line and then after the third—matching the text lines as written in the *puthi* with their melodic lines. But there are no further similarities. A comparison of the final notes in Tables 5.4 and 5.5 shows that while both schemas tend to conclude on the tonic for the main rhyme of the metre, Montazil Ali also finishes on the tonic at the end of the second part of the line as well, thereby creating two melodically closed endings within the same line (which is repeated in the second line).

Table 5.5: Comparison of melodic and poetic structures in Jonga Nama Tripodī (Montazil Ali)

Text Line	Jonga Nama Tripodī (p.221) Rhyme underlined (main rhyme in bold)	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
10	फरीशीला फाफरीला फोन • शुनोहो रसुलगनः firishta hakilo heno • shunoho rosulgonos	A/a, B/a	A B (pause)	Eb, G
11	फरजन्देन शुगे शाहा जरी ॥ Forjonder shuge shaha <b>Ali</b> [je hai Allah] ॥	C/b	AB(ext.) (pause)	G
12	देवानगान मन जशे • शबे देव पेदा पाशेः deonanar moto aishe • shobe deo ek pashe:	A/c, B/c	A B (pause)	Eb, G
13	राहा देव राहा देव बुली* raha deo raha deo <b>buli</b> [je hai Allah] *	C/b	AB(ext.) (pause)	G
14	शुने शबे बरे रे • खारा होला दूई दीगेः shune shobe bare are • khara hoila dui diges	A/c, B/c	A B (pause)	Eb, G
15	शबे पामे देखीन जरीने ॥ shobe kande dekhia <b>Alire</b> [je hai Allah] ॥	C/c	AB(ext.) (pause)	G
16	बेदेन बेदान मन • देखे शाहा मनुदः beser betar <b>ton</b> • dekhe shaha monodon:	A/d, B/d	A B (pause)	Eb, G
17	पामे जरी बहुत कतरे* kande Ali bohuto <b>katore</b> [je hai Allah] *	C/c	AB(ext.) (pause)	G

Additionally, like Abdul Korim, Montazil Ali inserts an exclamation at the end of line C: 'je hai Allah' ('Oh Allah alas!'). Montazil Ali, however, inserts his exclamation at the end of every C line; Abdul Korim in just over a third of them. But further, Abdul Korim's exclamation leads the tune in a descent to conclude on a note



other than the tonic (T1, Figure 5.12; *D* or *C*, C5). In contrast, Montazil Ali's use of the exclamation not only reinforces the tonic, it is also used to supplement the number of syllables needed to complete the combined A-B melodic line ('*je*' corresponding with the *Ab* and *G* of B3-B4; and '*hai Allah*' corresponding with the *Ab* and *G* of the B4 extension).

The analysis above shows quite convincingly that the two tunes used by Abdul Korim and Montazil Ali in their reading of *tripodī boyans* from *Jongo Nama*, contain far more differences than similarities. It also demonstrates that although Abdul Korim seems to be using the same essential melodic material in the construction of his *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, Montazil Ali's tunes bear little relation to each other.

In this section we have looked at three *pojar* tunes and two *tripodī* tunes from *Jongo Nama*. There are enough similarities between Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's *pojar* schemas to conclude (etically) that they are, in effect, using the 'same tune'. Montazil Ali's *pojar* schema may reference the same B phrase, but there are too many features of his schema that differ from the other two to draw any firm conclusions. The way in which all three *pojar* schemas are used in relation to the text, though (through poetic-melodic tension or pausing), does suggest that each reader has a technique to generate momentum in their reading of the *Jongo Nama pojar boyans* that reveals a similarity in their approach to the performance of this epic *puthi*. In their text-tune concurrency, the two *tripodī* schemas show a parallel approach, which contrasts with the *pojar*, but which is functionally appropriate. Melodically, however, there is little that indicates a connection between them. While Abdul Korim may be using (and adapting) the same basic schema in constructing his *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, Montazil Ali's schemas are, apart from their economic use of melodic material, clearly distinct. Until we consider examples from the other two *puthis*, however, it will not be possible to state which of these, if either, is the more typical.

More broadly, the intervals constructed from semitonal categories in all of the schemas, as well as their general conjunct melodic motion, show that *puthi-pora* uses a tuning system based on twelve-semitones. The pattern of notes used in each of the schemas reveals that diatonic scales, common in Bengali music, are also in use; namely, *khamaj*, *kaphi*, and *bhairavi*. Of course, we will need to consider further examples before determining whether this is true of all of the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes,

but it strongly indicates that *puthi-pora* is, indeed, a part of Bengali musical culture as expected. What can be stated unequivocally, however, even from these few examples, is that these tunes do not consist ‘of only three or four notes’, as Goswami (2000:862) asserts. The largest pitch range is found in Abdul Korim’s *tripodī* schema—a minor tenth, with all ten pitches being used. Even the smallest pitch range (the minor sixth in Montazil Ali’s *pojar* schema) exceeds Goswami’s claim. In the light of these things, to challenge Dunham’s (1997:49) view, it is difficult to understand in what way these *puthi-pora* tunes are supposed to be ‘less musically orientated’ than the *jarīgan* songs, particularly as the majority of *jarīgan* songs remain within a hexachord, and the largest pitch range she has encountered is a major ninth (Dunham 1997:138). The attempt to define what ‘reading melodically’ is, on its own terms, will be reserved for the end of the chapter, after *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes from the other two *puthis* are discussed. We turn next to *Mohobbot Nama*.

### ***Mohobbot Nama*: ‘Love Story’**

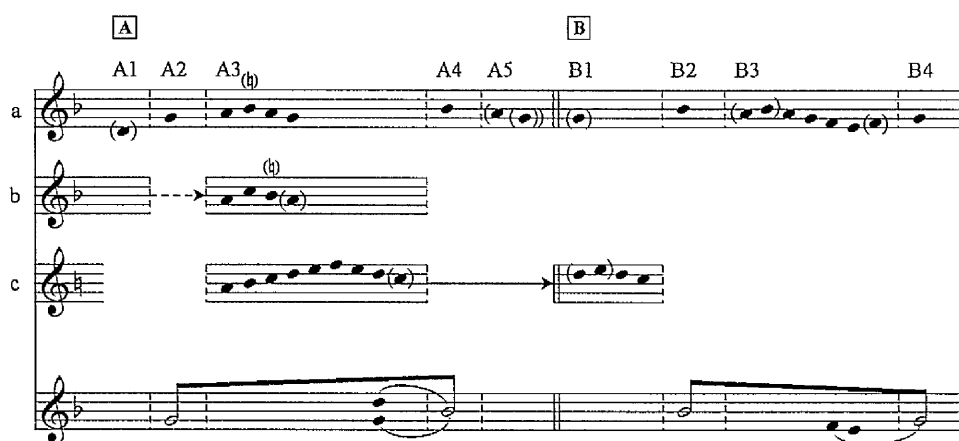
The compositional structure of *Mohobbot Nama* is quite different from *Jongo Nama*. It is a much shorter *puthi* (95 pages compared with 460), but there are nearly twice as many *tripodī boyans* (13 compared with 7). In fact, there are almost as many *tripodī* as *pojar boyans* in *Mohobbot Nama*. Apart from two places in the *puthi*, where more than one *pojar boyan* is found following another, *pojar* and *tripodī boyans* alternate throughout. The *pojar boyans* are longer, but even the longest *boyan* does not exceed 12 pages. Therefore, there are never more than 12 pages of reading before a reader and his (or her) audience will encounter a compositional change. This stands in stark contrast to the 83 pages of 15 *pojar boyans* in *Jongo Nama* (pp.253-336) which lie between two single *tripodī boyans* of just 3 pages each! In view of their frequent use, it would be interesting to know what the narrative function of each *tripodī boyan* in *Mohobbot Nama* is, and whether they are the same. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of the thesis. Our focus, here, is to consider the tunes used to read these two poetic metres, tunes which are taken from recordings of the same three *puthi*-readers. We will begin with Abdul Lotif’s *pojar* tune.

*Example P4: Abdul Lotif's Poyar (CD/P4)*

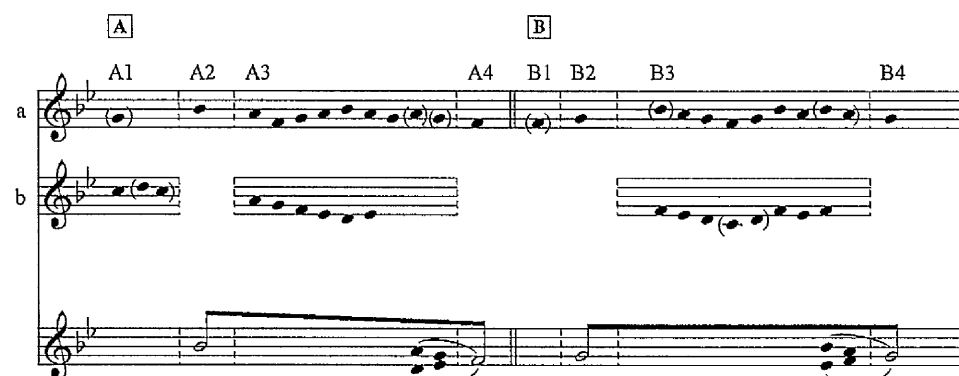
This *poyar* tune, like all of the previous tunes, shows the use of a diatonic scale. *G* is the clear tonal centre, but the exact scale in use is not so clear (Figure 5.14). This is largely due to the ambivalent nature of the third degree of the scale, which fluctuates between major and minor (*B* natural and *Bb*). Although *B* natural is used consistently in variation 'c', it is only heard occasionally in variations 'a' and 'b', in which *Bb* is more dominant. Because variation 'c' is infrequently performed, the overwhelming 'feel' to this *poyar* tune is minor. *Bb* and the interval of a minor third created by its relation to the tonic are more constant. *B* natural in variation 'c' may, therefore, best be understood as a chromatic alteration. The scale used here, then, as in example P3, is *kaphi*. The pitch range is a minor tenth; a perfect fourth below *G* (*D*, A1a) and a minor seventh above (*F*, A3c). With the exception of the 'c' variant, the pitch range stays within an octave.

Figure 5.14: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Poyar and Jongo Nama Poyar: Abdul Lotif

P4: Abdul Lotif



P1: Abdul Lotif



The melodic structure employed in the performance of this *boyan*, is a simple alternation between phrases A and B. The structural progression is between the tonic and the third in phrase A (*G-Bb*, A2-A4), and between the third and the tonic in phrase B (*Bb-G*, B2-B4). A few of the 'b' line variations start at A3b (indicated by the dashed arrow), but the majority of the melodic material in variation lines 'a' and 'b' progress through these notes. Variation line 'c' omits A4 and A5 altogether, moving directly to B1c before picking up the rest of phrase B at B2 (indicated by the straight arrow). This sets line 'c' apart as more of an independent melodic line. A5 is attached to the end of the A phrases in just over half of their occurrences. In these instances, it is more common for the phrase to end on the tonic, creating a closed ending.<sup>32</sup> Where the phrase ends on *Bb* in A4, it remains open. In terms of contour, all variations of phrase A (A2-A5) are based on melodic arches, while phrase B employs a basic axial contour.

The main variation of melodic material in this *pojar* is the third category slot of phrase A (A3). Apart from the tonic, the minor third is the only other significant pitch in variation line 'a'. The second and fourth degrees of the scale (*A* and *C*) are significant pitches in variation line 'b', particularly so because this variation often begins on *A* (A3b) rather than *G* (A2). It is interesting to note that the upward leap of a minor third between the second and the fourth degrees of the scale was also a feature of Abdul Lotif's *Jongo Nama pojar*. The upward scalar progression from *G* to *F* in variation line 'c' (A2-A3c) strongly emphasises the interval of a minor seventh. Saaduddin (1980:112) notes that 'The minor 7th plays an important melodic role [in Bengali music,] in that it invariably introduces a movement down to the tonic or the fifth of the scale'. Following the ascent to *F*, we see both the fifth (*D*, A3c/B1c) and the tonic (*G*, B3/B4) emphasised in the descent of the phrase. Although this variation is used infrequently (five out of twenty-one A phrase lines), it is further evidence, nonetheless, of *puthi-pora*'s congruence with Bengali musical culture. The more frequently used lines are 'a' and 'b' (sixteen out of twenty-one), with 'b' as the most frequent (nine times). A1 is only ever used in variations 'a' and 'c', never in 'b', and so, barring the infrequent leap between *D* and *G* (A1-A2), the largest interval in this *pojar* is a minor third.

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<sup>32</sup> On a couple of occasions the phrase ends on *A*, not *G*, creating an open ending.

In contrast to the melodic and poetic asymmetry of example P1, phrases A and B match lines A and B of the *poyar* couplet without exception, creating complete symmetry between both melodic and poetic structures (see Table 5.6). This symmetry is further emphasised in performance by means of a pause after every second line (at the end of every completed couplet). What little tension is created by the melodically-open ending of phrase A is resolved by a return to the tonic at the end of phrase B. This is repeated in every couplet.<sup>33</sup> Although Abdul Lotif does not use the same kind of melodic and poetic tension in this *poyar* tune as he did with the *poyar* tune used for *Jongo Nama*, we saw above that *Mohobbot Nama*, in contrast to *Jongo Nama*, is one of the shorter Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* with relatively short *poyar boyans*. In addition, the structure of the *puthi* is such that most *poyar boyans* are followed by, and alternated with, *tripodī boyans*, which creates internal variety. As a result, one could argue that there is not the same need to generate momentum through melodic and poetic tension to push the narrative forward as there (arguably) is in *Jongo Nama*.

Table 5.6: Symmetry of melodic and poetic structures (Abdul Lotif)

Text Line	Mohobbot Nama Poyar (pp.24-25) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
21	পৈ পৈ শুনো অৰ শোমোৱা ॥ er pore shuno ar shomacar ॥	A/a	A 'a' (cont.)	Bb
22	তোমুস নামেতে সীলা শোহৰ অৰ* Toemus namete sila shohor ar*	B/a	B (pause)	G
23	হাতী গুৰা মাল মাতা বেশোম ॥ hati gura mal matta beshomar ॥	A/b	A 'b' (cont.)	G
24	তোমুস নামেতে বাদশা ওধিকাৰ* Toemus namete badsha odhikar*	B/b	B (pause)	G
25	সীপাহী লোশকৰ জো শীমা নাই ॥ sipahi loshkor joto shima nai ॥	A/c	A 'c' (cont.)	E
1	বাগে বোইশে পানী খায়ে এক থাই* baghe bhoishe pani khae ek thai*	B/c	B (pause)	G
2	না কুৰ দাকত অসে শোহোৱে ॥ Na cur dakat ase shohore ॥	A/d	A 'a' (cont.)	Bb
3	কোৱোৱে কোৱা নাই মাৰে না ধোৱে* Keorore keo nahi mare na dhore*	B/d	B (pause)	G

<sup>33</sup> While Abdul Lotif also pauses occasionally after the first couplet line, thus suspending the tension of the open ending just a little longer, it is only brief and does not create a sense of asymmetry between the melodic and poetic lines.

There is still, however, a certain amount of melodic expectation generated by the use of this *pojar* tune. This exists in the variation of melodic material mentioned above, particularly in the use of variation line 'c'. There does not seem to be a specific pattern to the use of this melodic line (occurring after 2, 4, 5, 1, and 2 couplets; or on lines 5, 15, 27, 31, and 37), nor does there seem to be a specific narrative significance to the choice of the textual lines in which it is employed.<sup>34</sup> Either Abdul Lotif is emphasising the lines of text which he himself likes or finds significant, or he is just simply adding melodic variation. There does not seem to be any particular pattern or significance to the use of variation lines 'a' and 'b' either, other than for the sake of variety. Abdul Lotif does, however, employ an interesting melodic device which is characteristic of his performance, a *glissando* at end of phrase B which falls away from G (possibly down to E or D, but it is not always clear). This is only used seven times in the *boyan* and, again, does not seem to follow a specific pattern or have any specific narrative significance. Perhaps because of the lack of melodic-poetic tension, this device (along with other performance techniques, such as eye-contact mentioned in chapters 2 and 3) is used primarily to maintain audience attention.

A comparison of Abdul Lotif's two *pojar* schemas shows that, while showing some expected melodic similarities, they are different. This is seen in the progression of notes that comprise their melodic contours, and, particularly, in the use of the 'c' line variation in P4. It is also clear in the contrast between the text-tune concurrency of Abdul Lotif's *Mohobbot Nama pojar* and the poetic-melodic tension he creates in *Jongo Nama*. Abdul Lotif for one, then, is not using the 'same tune' for reading *pojar boyans* from these two *puthis* (which is consistent with his and other readers' claims). We turn, next, to consider whether this is also true of Abdul Korim.

#### *Example P5: Abdul Korim's Poyar (CD/P5)*

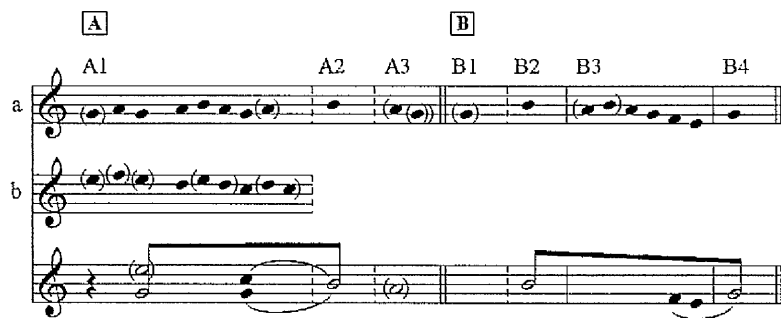
Figure 5.15 shows Abdul Korim's *pojar* schema,<sup>35</sup> created from the *puthi-pora* event I attended in Horipur on March 9, 2005. It was his reading from *Mohobbot Nama* that was met with such a hostile reaction. At its transposed pitch, the tonal centre of this example, like P4, is G. In the absence of the flattened third (Bb), however, a different

<sup>34</sup> Without a comprehensive analysis of the text, however, it is impossible to be certain. Understanding how text and tune interact in performance is an important area for future study.

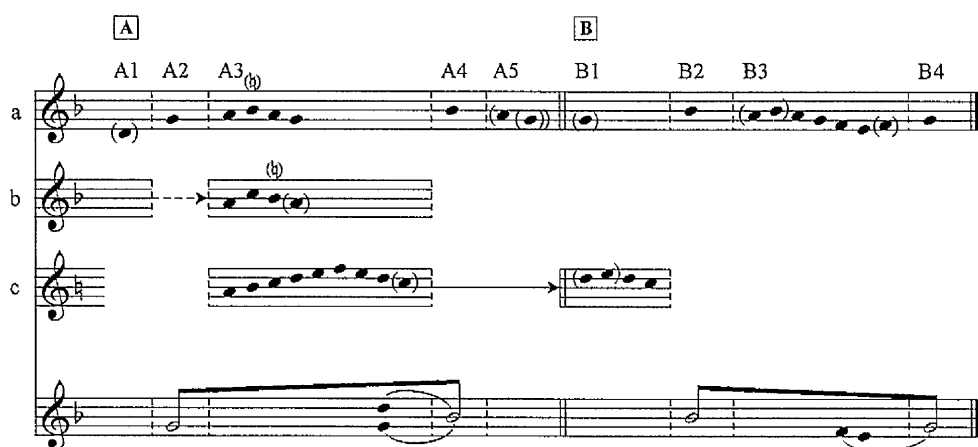
<sup>35</sup> The schema has been transposed up a fourth for easier comparison with the previous example.

Figure 5.15: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P5: Abdul Korim



P4: Abdul Lotif

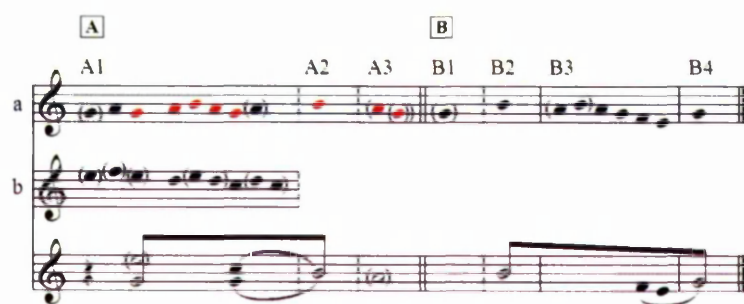


scale is in operation, *khamaj*, but the pitch range is similarly large: a minor ninth. The same basic melodic structure is also seen: a consistent alternation between phrases A and B, and a melodic progression moving between the tonic and the third degree of the scale in phrase A 'a' (*G-B*, A1-A2), and between the third and the tonic in phrase B (*B-G*, B2-B4). Most of the melodic movement is step-wise, apart from the upward leaps of a major third between B1 and B2 (*G-B*) and a minor third between B3 and B4 (*E-G*).

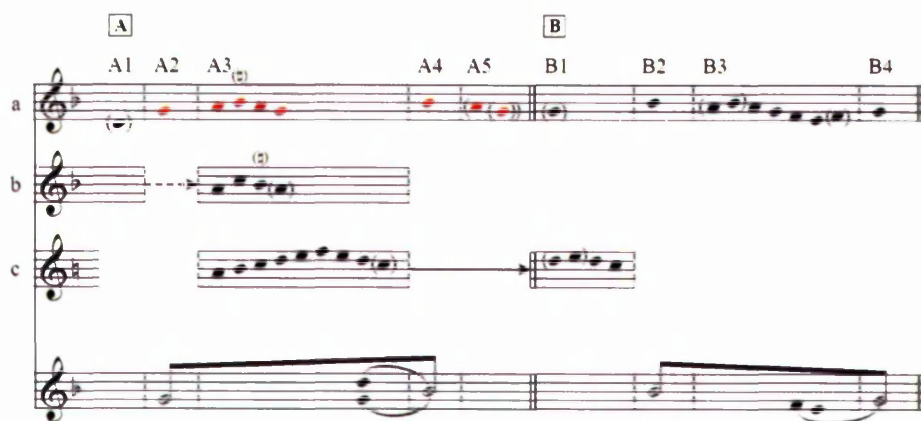
There are only two variation lines used in phrase A of this *poyar* tune ('a' and 'b') in contrast to the three of P4. The initial pitches differ (*D* in P4; *G-A/E-F* in P5), but they are infrequently used anyway (Figure 5.16). A3, like A5 in P4, is also not consistently used, attached to just over two-thirds of A phrase endings (in both 'a' and 'b' line variations). With the exception of the flattened third, and apart from Abdul Korim's tendency to fill in the upward leap between *G* and *B* (in A1-A2) with an *A*, variation line 'a' is basically the same as in P4.

Figure 5.16: Comparison of Phrase A 'a' in Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P5: Abdul Korim



P4: Abdul Lotif



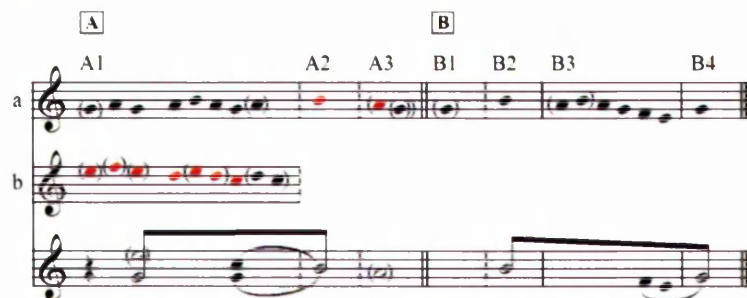
The melodic contour of the first three notes of A1a matches A1b a sixth apart, as do the following four notes which are a fourth apart (Figure 5.17). In their pitches, variation line 'b' of phrase A is similar to line 'c' in P4. While A1b does not have the same upward scalar progression as A3c of example P4, the three notes at the apex (*E-F-E*) are the same as the first three notes of P5. The following four notes (*D-E-D-C*) are found in B1c of P4; the *B-A* in A2a-A3a of P5 in B2a-B3a of P4, although the *B* is flattened in the latter. While the number of bracketed note-heads in P5 show a lack of consistency in their use (also a feature of Abdul Korim's *Jongo Nama poyar*), the fact that they can be combined to match this pattern of notes indicates that they nevertheless exist as a phrasal unit in Abdul Korim's mind. The similarities between A1b-A2a-A3a of P5 and A3c-B1c-B2a-B3a of P4 are certainly suggestive of a similar origin.

Phrase B of P5 is almost identical with P4, apart from the final *F* in B3a of P4 which Abdul Lotif occasionally uses to fill in the cadence from *E* to *G* (and, again, with the exception of the flattened third, Figure 5.18).



Figure 5.17: Comparison of Phrase A'b' in Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P5: Abdul Korim



P4: Abdul Lotif

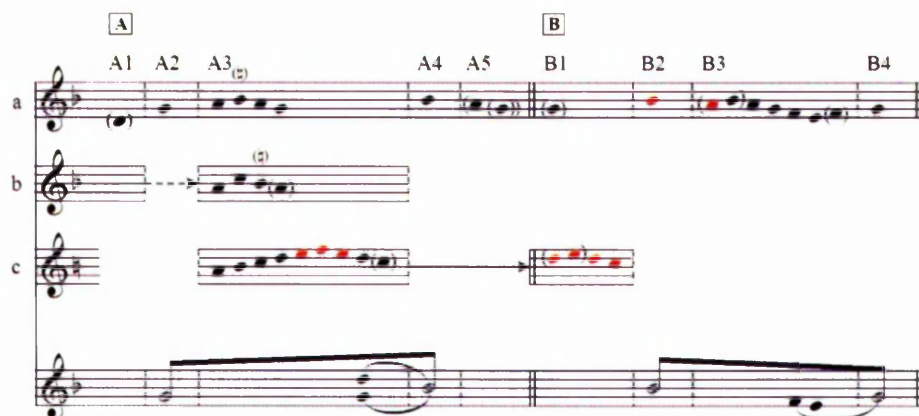
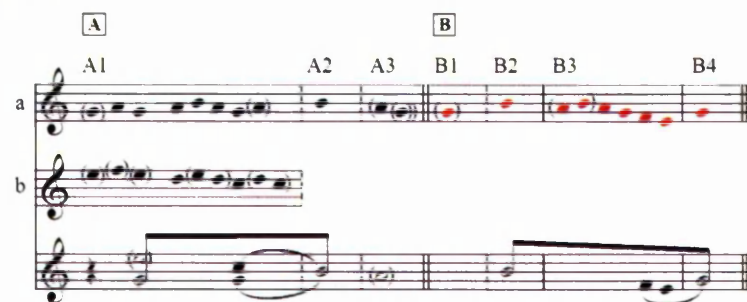
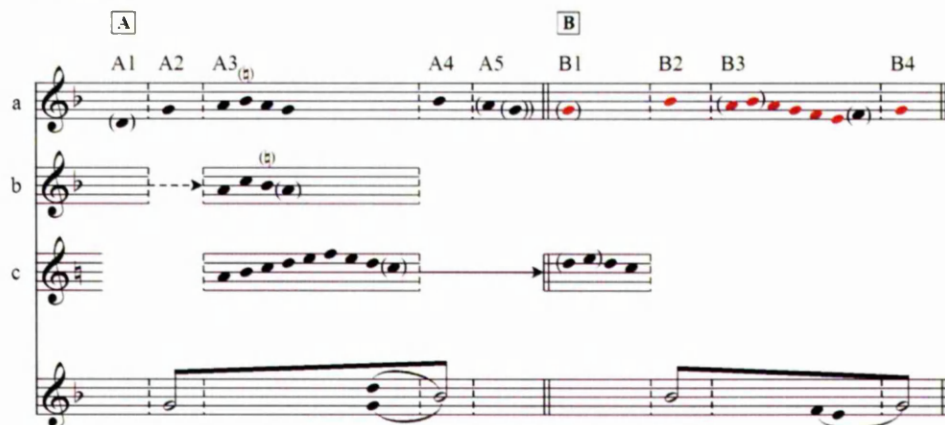


Figure 5.18: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

P5: Abdul Korim



P4: Abdul Lotif



Like Abdul Lotif in the previous example, Abdul Korim matches phrases A and B of the melodic structure with lines A and B of the *poyar* couplet (see Table 5.7). The open ending of the A phrase (B, A4; or A, A5) complements the first line of the couplet,<sup>36</sup> as does the closed ending of phrase B (G, B4) with the last line. The rhyme scheme of the *poyar* is emphasised by Abdul Korim's prolongation of the tonic at the end of phrase B. He follows this with a pause, creating a definite sense of finality to couplet. Again, like Abdul Lotif, he also pauses briefly at the end of the first line (phrase A), but this does not have the same emphasis, nor does it provide the same sense of conclusion. And, in spite of the symmetry created between the melodic and poetic lines (and therefore the lack of melodic-poetic tension), Abdul Korim does not generate the same amount of melodic expectation in his use of this *poyar* tune as Abdul Lotif did. This is, in part, because he has fewer variations in his schema. But it is more than that. His use of variations lines 'a' and 'b' in phrase A is predictable—alternating A'a' and A'b' with phrase B throughout (see Table 5.7). Perhaps it was the combination of this predictability, slow reading, and an uninteractive performance-style (noted in chapters 2 and 3), that led to the audience's negative response to his reading in contrast to their general approval of Abdul Lotif's.

Table 5.7: Symmetry of melodic and poetic structures (Abdul Korim)

Text Line	Mohobbot Nama Poyar (p.4) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
3	ધાશી ખુશી ચાની વઢન ગેઢીન ॥ Hashi khushi cari bosor gesilo ॥	A/a	A 'a' (cont.)	A
4	શમાની નામે જાન પુત્રનુ જમગીન* imani name ar putru jonmilo*	B/a	B (pause)	G
5	હુસુફ દોરા વડ શમાનીન ધુશ ॥ Iusuf hoila boro imanib suta ॥	A/b	A 'b' (cont.)	G
6	ચાની વઢન મશ્ને ધાશન દુશ વેશ* cari bosor moidhe hoilo dui beta*	B/b	B (pause)	G
7	પેરાપી જાનગીન પેરા પાનીન ॥ elahi almin esa korilo ॥	A/a	A 'a' (cont.)	A
8	દુશ શીશુ નાખીન માપે મનીન* dui shishu rakhia mae morilo*	B/a	B (pause)	G
9	ધનજમે નાખીન માપે મની જાપે ॥ forjonde rakhia mae mori jae ॥	A/c	A 'b' (cont.)	B
10	પાનમે શનપુવ નવી ધાપે ધાપે* Kande lakub nobi hae have	B/c	B (pause)	G

<sup>36</sup> Although in some instances where A5 is used, the melody descends to a G thereby creating a closed ending and lessening the sense of expectation (see Table 5.6, line 5).

As far as his schema is concerned, however, the similarity of melodic features in P4 and P5 clearly shows that Abdul Korim is referencing the same basic schema as Abdul Lotif in constructing his *pojar* tune. It is also clear that both employ a greater concurrency between melodic and poetic structures in this *puthi* than they do in *Jongo Nama*. Indeed, they both use two different tunes to read the *pojar boyans* in *Jongo Nama* and *Mohobbot Nama*, but the ‘same tune’ for each. We turn now to our final *pojar* example from *Mohobbot Nama*, to see whether Montazil Ali also uses the ‘same tune’ as Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim, and whether this tune is different from the one he used to read the *pojar boyans* from *Jongo Nama*.

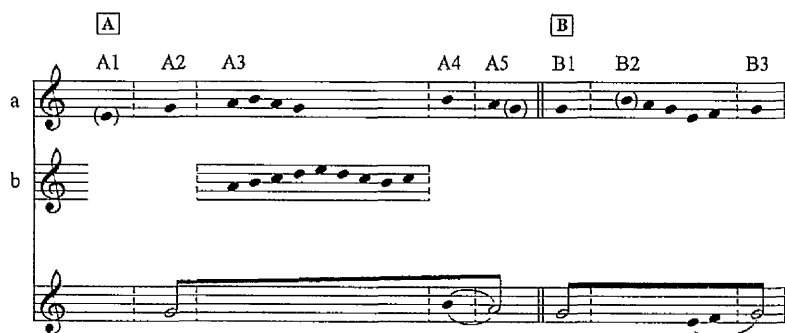
### Example P6: Montazil Ali’s Poyar (CD/P6)

In Montazil Ali’s *pojar*,<sup>37</sup> G is again the tonal centre (Figure 5.19). As in the previous example, there is no flattened third, which implies the use of *khamaj*. The pitch range remains within an octave, less than P4 (a minor tenth) and P5 (a minor ninth). The melodic structure, however, is the same: alternating between phrases A and B, mainly between variation line ‘a’ of the A phrase, and phrase B. Variation line ‘b’ (A3b) occurs just four times in the whole example.

Phrase A variation line ‘a’ is almost identical here to phrase A ‘a’ in P4 (Figure 5.20). Apart from the natural third (although it is occasionally naturalised in P4), the only difference is the A1a category slot, the use of *E* instead of *D*. This same pattern of notes is also seen in P5 (similarities between P4 and P5 were noted in the previous section).

Figure 5.19: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

P6: Montazil Ali



<sup>37</sup> This schema has been transposed down a major second.

P4: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.20 displays the musical score for P4: Abdul Lotif. The score is written for three staves (a, b, and c) and includes a fourth staff at the bottom. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two main sections, A and B, indicated by boxed labels above the staves. Section A contains notes A1, A2, A3, A4, and A5. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, and B4. The notes are written in a stylized, handwritten manner. The bottom staff features a continuous melodic line with a large slur over the first half and a smaller slur over the second half.

P5: Abdul Korim

Figure 5.20 displays the musical score for P5: Abdul Korim. The score is written for three staves (a, b, and c) and includes a fourth staff at the bottom. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two main sections, A and B, indicated by boxed labels above the staves. Section A contains notes A1, A2, and A3. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, and B4. The notes are written in a stylized, handwritten manner. The bottom staff features a continuous melodic line with a large slur over the first half and a smaller slur over the second half.

Figure 5.20: Comparison of Phrase A 'a' in Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

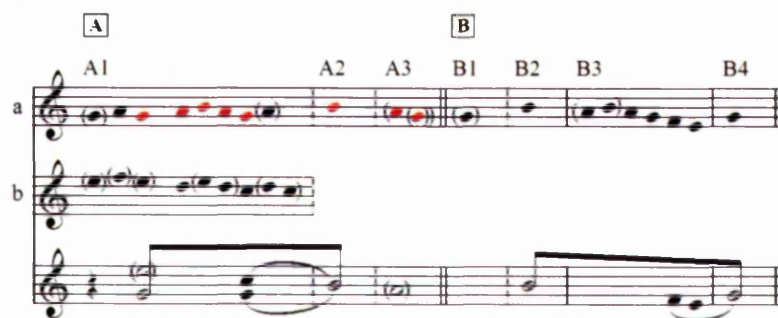
P6: Montazil Ali

Figure 5.20 displays the musical score for P6: Montazil Ali. The score is written for two staves (a and b) and includes a third staff at the bottom. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two main sections, A and B, indicated by boxed labels above the staves. Section A contains notes A1, A2, and A3. Section B contains notes B1, B2, and B3. The notes are written in a stylized, handwritten manner. The bottom staff features a continuous melodic line with a large slur over the first half and a smaller slur over the second half.

P4: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.20 displays the musical score for P4: Abdul Lotif. The score is written for three staves (a, b, and c) and includes a fourth staff at the bottom. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two main sections, A and B, indicated by boxed labels above the staves. Section A contains notes A1, A2, A3, A4, and A5. Section B contains notes B1, B2, B3, and B4. The notes are written in a stylized, handwritten manner. The bottom staff features a continuous melodic line with a large slur over the first half and a smaller slur over the second half.

P5: Abdul Korim

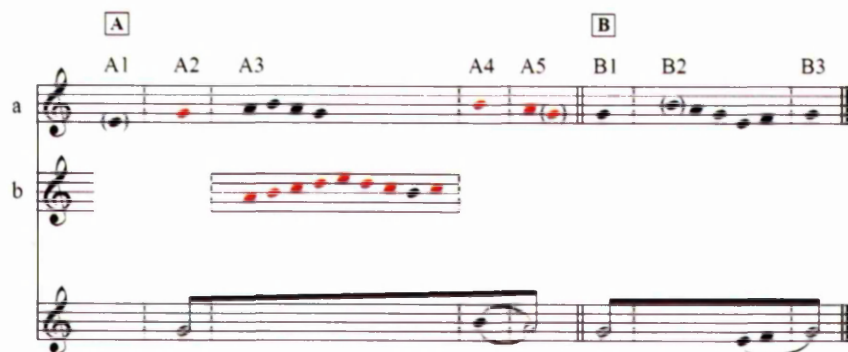


The contour in variation line 'b' of P6 is the same as variation line 'c' of P4 (Figure 5.21). In this line, a similar scalar progression runs from the tonic (A2) up to *E*, the sixth (instead of *F*), and then back down again to *B*, the third (again, a semi-tone lower than P4 and P5), up to *C* and back to *B* (A4), ending back at the tonic again via *A* (A5).

The same notes can be seen in P4 (A2a-A3c-B1c-B2a-B3a), although not in direct succession. The *D-E-D-C* (A1b) and *B-A-G* (A2a-A3a) can also be seen in P5. While variation line 'b' is used infrequently in P6, when it is used, it descends to the tonic (A5) which creates a closed ending to the variation. With just one exception, every other A phrase line ends on *A*, creating an open ending by emphasising the second degree of the scale (similar to the phrase B endings seen in P1 and P2). Phrase A in P5 occasionally ends on *A*, hence the brackets in the schenker-style reduction in A3. Generally, though, phrase A in P4 and P5 ends on *B/Bb*.

Figure 5.21: Comparison of Phrase A 'b' in Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

P6: Montazil Ali



P4: Abdul Lotif

P5: Abdul Korim

In contrast to the previous two examples, the third, *B*, which was one of the stable category slots in phrase B of P4 and P5 (B2), is not always used here (Figure 5.22). Therefore, the structural progression in P6 is from tonic to tonic (B1-B3), rather than from third to tonic (B2-B4) as in P4 and P5. Nevertheless, the first four notes (*G-B-A-G*) of phrase B in P6 are also seen in the other two examples. The cadence rises to the tonic (*E-F-G*, B2-B3), having first leapt from the tonic down to the sixth just beforehand (*G-E*, B2). This contrasts with the cadence in P5, which first descends to the sixth from the tonic (*G-F-E*, B3), and then leaps up from the sixth to the tonic (*E-G*, B3-B4). This is also a feature of the Phrase B cadence in P4, although Abdul Lotif sometimes fills in *E-G* with an *F*. This leading up to the tonic, which has no bearing on the overall contour, somehow makes the cadence feel a little less conclusive.

Montazil Ali's performance of this *boyan* is, like the previous two examples, very text-tune concurrent. The melodic structure alternates between phrases A and B which parallel the two lines of the *poyar* couplet—phrase A with the first line of the couplet, phrase B with the second (see Table 5.8). Rather than pausing after every



Figure 5.22: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

P6: Montazil Ali

P4: Abdul Lotif

P5: Abdul Korim

couplet, Montazil Ali pauses consistently after every four lines. This does not fit with the structure of the narrative especially, and adds no extra tension or expectancy. The only melodic variation in this tune is the use of phrase A'b' which occurs just four times in the whole example (four of 162 lines). Where it does occur, it always follows a pause. It is hard to determine the intended function of this line, but, because its use

Table 5.8 Symmetry of melodic and poetic structures (Montazil Ali)

Text Line	Mohobbot Nama Poyar (p.12) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
18	ଦୁଶ ଜାନା ଟଗନା ଦୁଶ ଜାବେଦାର ॥ dosh tara amra dosh tabedar ॥	A/a	A 'a' (cont.)	A
19	ରାତ୍ରୀ ଦିନ କୁଶେ ରୋବି ଟକ୍କେ ଟାର* ratri din kushe roibo tokke tar *	B/a	B (pause)	G
20	ଟଗନା ଖାଦିମ ରୋଇମ୍ ପାଟି ଟାର ॥ amra khadim roimu paer tol ॥	A/b	A 'a' (cont.)	A
21	ହୁସୁଫ ମହର ଟଗନା ପାୟିମ୍ ଶୋକଲ* Iusuf moile amra paimu shokol *	B/b	B (cont.)	G
22	ହରାବ ଖୋବର ଶୋବ ଜାନିଲାର ॥ ihar khobor shob janilam ॥	A/c	A 'a' (cont.)	A
23	ହୁସୁଫ ମାରନ ହୋ ବହାଲ କାମ* Iusuf maron hoe bhala kam *	B/c	B (pause)	G
24	ଶିକାରେ ଲୋଇ ଜାୟିମ୍ ବୁଲାଇ ॥ Shikare loia jaimu bhulaia ॥	A/d	A 'b' (cont.)	G
25	ଜଙ୍ଗଲେ ମାରିମ୍ ସାଲ କୋରି* Jongole marimu salla koria *	B/d	B (cont.)	G

does not always appear to coincide with the narrative tension, it is, like variation 'c' of example P3, likely to be used as a melodic device to generate variation in order to sustain audience interest.

In sum, there are no significant differences between Montazil Ali's *Mohobbot Nama poyar* schema and those used by Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim. The evidence is sufficient to conclude that all three readers are referencing the same melodic meta-schema and, therefore, can be said to be using the 'same tune'. As we move on to look at the tunes the same three readers use to read *tripodī boyans* from *Mohobbot Nama*, it will be interesting to see whether these are also the same. It will also be interesting to see whether each reader's *tripodī* tune is adapted from the same basic schema as their *poyars* (as Abdul Korim's was in *Jongo Nama*), or whether they are constructed from a completely different schema (as Montazil Ali's was).



*Example T3: Abdul Lotif's Tripodī (CD/T3)*

In comparing Abdul Lotif's *tripodī*<sup>38</sup> with his *poṃar* (Figure 5.23), the first thing to note is the use of the same scale: *kaphi*. While the Schenker-style reduction shows *C* to be a prominent note in the overall structure of the tune (as well as *E* and *G*), the fact that both stable category slots in phrase C (*C2*, *C4*) establish *G*, and that *G* is therefore the final note of each *tripodī* line, suggests that *G* is the tonic. Their pitch ranges, too, are almost identical both in their overall range and in the intervals created above and below the tonic.

Figure 5.23: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Lotif

T3: Abdul Lotif

P4: Abdul Lotif

<sup>38</sup> The example from which I created the schema (pp.28-29) was recorded during the February 21 event and followed the reading of two *poṃar* sections (pp.24-28). Abdul Lotif stopped for a matter of five or six seconds between finishing the *poṃar* and beginning the *tripodī*. Therefore, unlike the previous two examples, these two tunes were read in direct succession. P4 and T3 were transcribed at pitch which makes a comparison of their melodic features a little more straightforward.

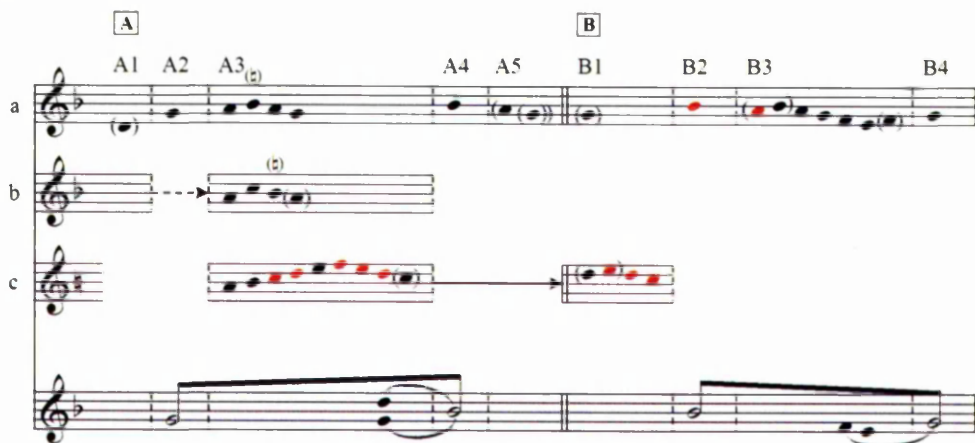
If we look a little closer, however, we begin to notice that Abdul Lotif's *poyar* and *tripodī* schemas seem to have more in common than just scale and pitch range. While the structural progressions are quite different (*G-Bb-Bb-G*, P4; *C-C-C-E-G-G*, T3), several melodic groupings seen in the *tripodī* can be identified in the *poyar*.<sup>39</sup> Beginning with phrase A (Figure 5.24), the first five notes in A1a-A2a (*C-D-[F]-E-D*) are found in A3c of the *poyar*; the following five notes (*[E-D]-C-[Bb]-A*) in A2a-A4a are found in B1c-B2a-B3a of the *poyar*. A4b-B1b is the same groups of notes as the first four notes of A2 (*D-F-E-D*).

Figure 5.24: Comparison of Phrase A in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Lotif

T3: Abdul Lotif



P4: Abdul Lotif

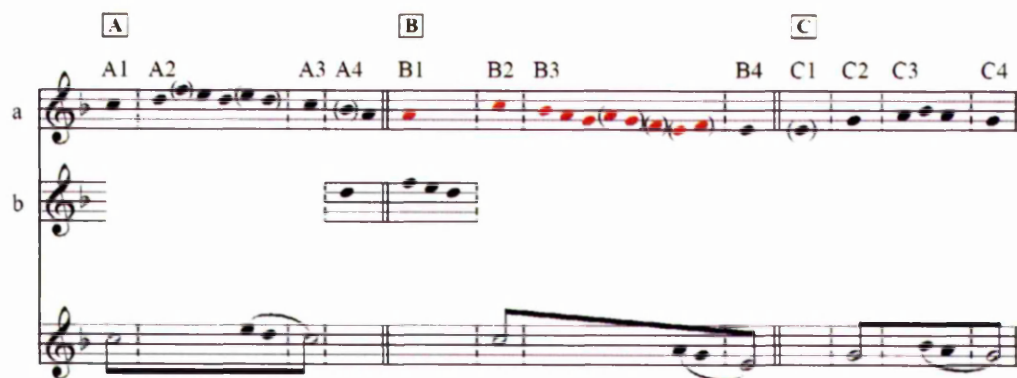


<sup>39</sup> A 'melodic grouping' is described by Snyder (2000:135) as that which 'consists of several pitched events that are perceived as a unit because of similarity of interval and direction of melodic motion.' A phrase, in addition, can be described as 'a group of melodic groupings' (2000:135).

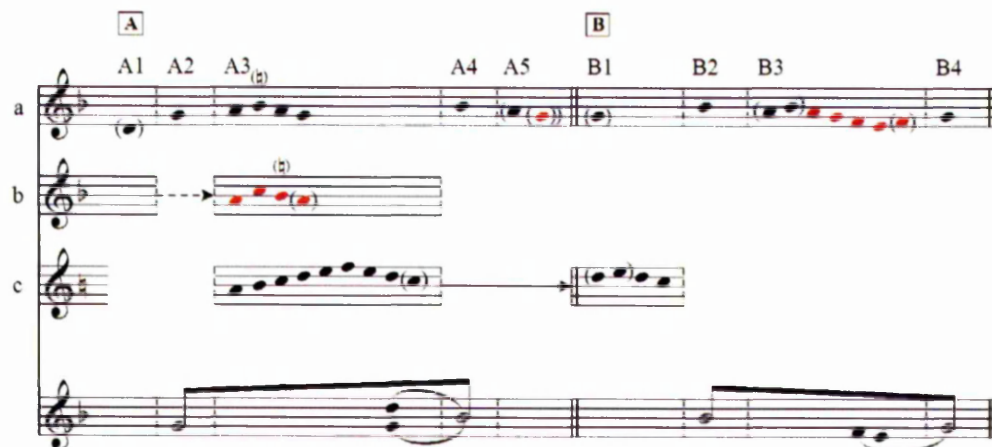
The first four notes of Phrase B (*A-C-Bb-A*; found in B1a-B3) exhibit the same characteristic initial minor third leap between *A* and *C*, the second and fourth degrees of the scale, as in the melodic grouping in A3b of P4 (Figure 5.25). The subsequent *G* is the main final note in A5 of P4. The five final notes in B3a of T3 (*A-G-F-E-F*) are the same five final notes in B3a of P4. It is the final note of phrase B, however, that creates the distinction between them.

Figure 5.25: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar:  
Abdul Lotif

T3: Abdul Lotif



P4: Abdul Lotif



The melodic grouping in phrase C, too, particularly C2-C4 (*G-A-Bb-A-G*), is exactly the same pattern of notes found in A2-A3a of the *poyar* (Figure 5.26). Even C1 shows some similarity with A1 in that they both contain intervallic leaps to the tonic.

Figure 5.26: Comparison of Phrase C in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar:  
Abdul Lotif

T3: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.26 shows the musical score for T3: Abdul Lotif. It consists of four staves. The top staff (a) contains a sequence of melodic phrases labeled A1, A2, A3, A4, B1, B2, B3, B4, C1, C2, C3, and C4. The second staff (b) contains a short melodic phrase. The third staff (c) contains a short melodic phrase. The fourth staff contains a long melodic phrase.

P4: Abdul Lotif

Figure 5.26 shows the musical score for P4: Abdul Lotif. It consists of four staves. The top staff (a) contains a sequence of melodic phrases labeled A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, B2, B3, and B4. The second staff (b) contains a short melodic phrase. The third staff (c) contains a short melodic phrase. The fourth staff contains a long melodic phrase.

All these similarities are significant. For just as there were similarities between Abdul Korim's *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes from *Jongo Nama*, it would seem as if Abdul Lotif is using generic melodic material to construct/re-construct his *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes from *Mohobbot Nama*.

The melodic structure in this *tripodī* tune is the same as Abdul Korim's *Jongo Nama tripodī* (cf. T1). Phrases A and B are combined and read as a continuous melodic line, paralleling parts A and B of the tripartite *tripodī* line. This is followed by a pause and then the final part of the *tripodī* line using phrase C. Table 5.9 shows a comparison of the poetic and melodic structures and the final note used in the melodic phrases. We see here again, as in Table 5.4, that Abdul Lotif's *tripodī* tune is very text-concurrent. The tonic is used only to establish the main rhyme thereby creating a closed ending to both *tripodī* lines, while *E*, the sixth degree of the scale, is used at

Table 5.9: Comparison of melodic and poetic structures in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (Abdul Lotif)

Text Line	Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (p.28) Rhyme underlined (main rhyme in bold)	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
18	Julikha kator <u>hoia</u> ° shei rup na <u>paia</u> ° Julikha kator <u>hoia</u> ° shei rup na <u>paia</u> °	A/a, B/a	A B (pause)	A, E
19	oporup dekhia <u>shopne</u> ॥ oporup dekhia <u>shopne</u> ॥	C/b	C (pause)	G
20	ontore tapish boro ° bipak ghotilo doro° ontore tapish boro ° bipak ghotilo doro°	A/c, B/c	A B (pause)	A, E
21	kandite lagila dashigone * kandite lagila dashigone *	C/b	C (pause)	G
22	Julikha bulila <u>por</u> ° porani na bace <u>mor</u> ° Julikha bulila <u>por</u> ° porani na bace <u>mor</u> °	A/d, B/d	A B (pause)	D, E
23	shei rup dekhibar <u>lagia</u> ॥ shei rup dekhibar <u>lagia</u> ॥	C/a	C (pause)	G
24	koho tora shob <u>shokhi</u> ° ki mote poran <u>rakhi</u> ° koho tora shob <u>shokhi</u> ° ki mote poran <u>rakhi</u> °	A/e, B/e	A B (pause)	D, E
25	koto din morimu <u>jhoria</u> * koto din morimu <u>jhoria</u> *	C/a	C (pause)	G

the end of the second part of both lines to create an open ending to the internal rhyme, and therefore giving primacy to the main rhyme. This text-tune concurrency was also a feature of Abdul Lotif's *pojar* from *Mohobbot Nama*.

We move on now to look at Abdul Korim's *tripodī*. Because of the correlation between melodic groupings in his *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes in *Jongo Nama*, and in the light of those seen in Abdul Lotif's *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes above (in addition to the structural similarities between Abdul Korim's *Jongo Nama tripodī* and Abdul Lotif's *Mohobbot Nama tripodī*, and the more general correlation between all the other tunes used by these two readers), we may reasonably expect that these same correlations will be in evidence here. In considering his *tripodī* tune, then, I will consider both the similarities and differences between it and his *pojar* and Abdul Lotif's *tripodī* above.

#### Example T4: Abdul Korim's Tripodī (CD/T4)

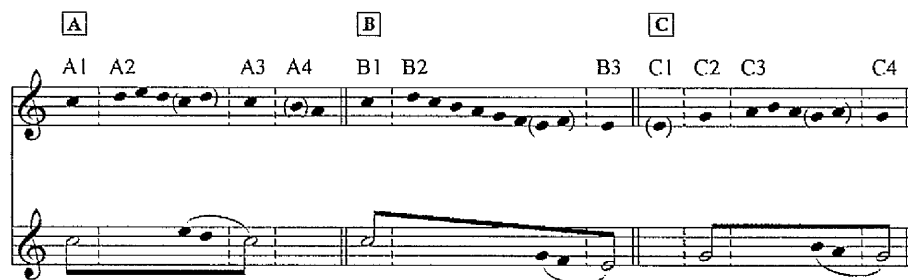
The obvious parallels between Abdul Korim's *pojar* and *tripodī*<sup>40</sup> tunes are seen in the use of the same scale (*khamaj*), the same tonic (G), and a similar pitch range—an octave, just a semitone lower than the *pojar* (Figure 5.27). Abdul Lotif and Abdul

<sup>40</sup> Like his *pojar*, T4 has been transposed up a fourth. It is the *tripodī* that immediately follows the *pojar* in the *puthi* and was read in direct succession in the performance.

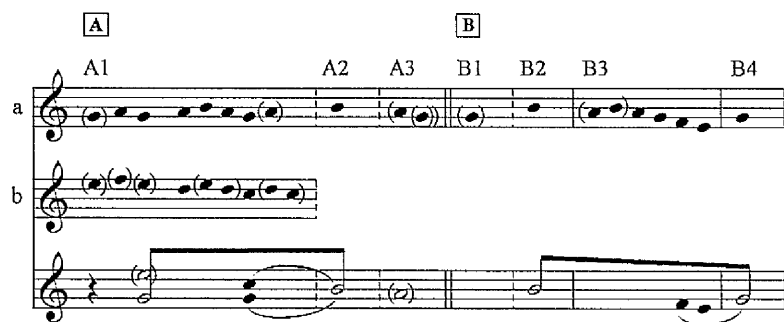
Korim, therefore, consistently use just one scale to read their *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes but one that differs from each other (Abdul Lotif uses *kaphi*; Abdul Korim, *khamaj*). Similarly, both readers use the same tonic in both tunes and reduce their pitch ranges in a similar fashion—between Abdul Lotif’s *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, a minor tenth to a minor ninth; between Abdul Korim’s two tunes, a minor ninth to an octave.

Figure 5.27: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Pojar: Abdul Korim

T4: Abdul Korim



P5: Abdul Korim



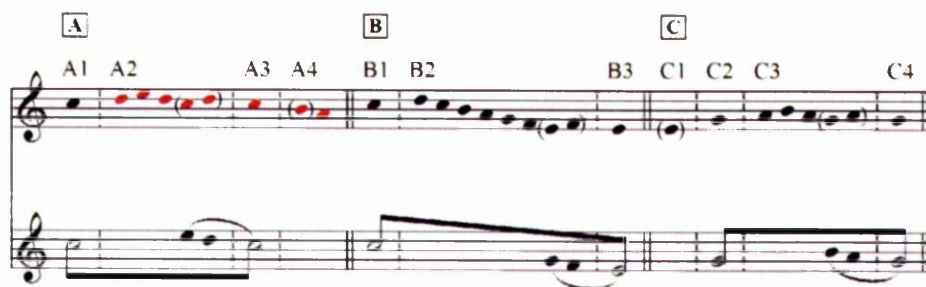
When we begin to break the melodic phrases down into individual groups of notes, we see the same kind of correlation between *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes noted in example T3 above. A2-A3 of T4 is the exact same grouping of notes as the final six notes of A1b in P5 (Figure 5.28). The *B* and *A* that follow in A4 can also be seen in A2a-A3a of the *pojar*.

The first three notes in B1 and B2 of T4 (*C-D-C*) are again found in the final three notes of A1b in P5 (Figure 5.29). The *B-E* descent that follows in B2 of T4 is found in B3 of P5 (*B-G* can also be seen in A2-A3, following the *C-D-C* in A1b), but rather than rising to the tonic, the phrase comes to rest on *E*, the sixth degree of the scale, as it does in Abdul Lotif’s phrase B (T3).



Figure 5.28: Comparison of Phrase A in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar:  
Abdul Korim

T4: Abdul Korim



P5: Abdul Korim

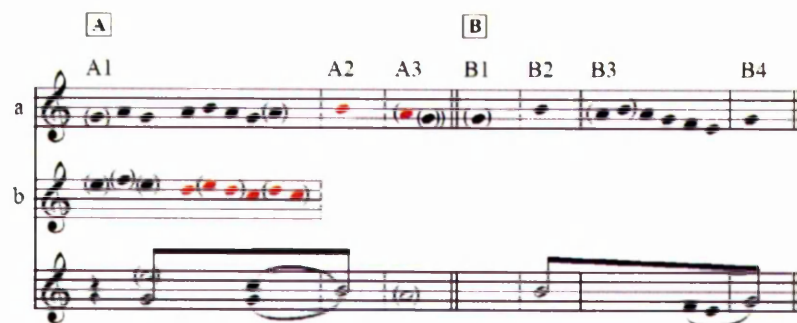
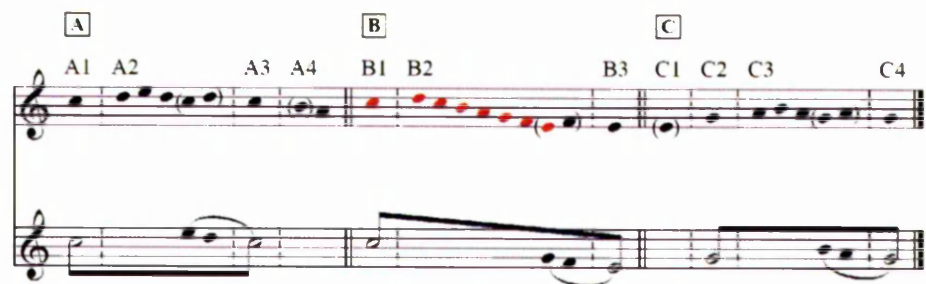
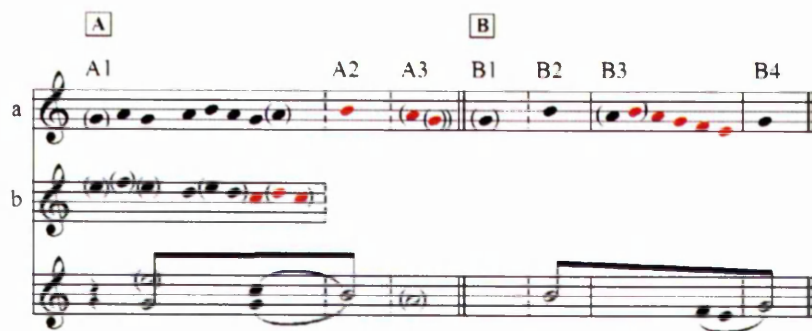


Figure 5.29: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar:  
Abdul Korim

T4: Abdul Korim



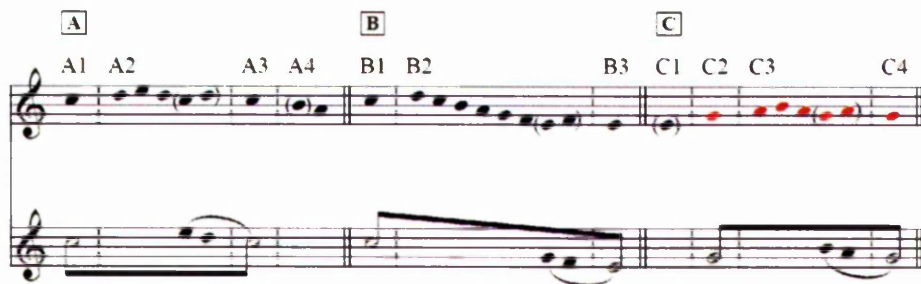
P5: Abdul Korim



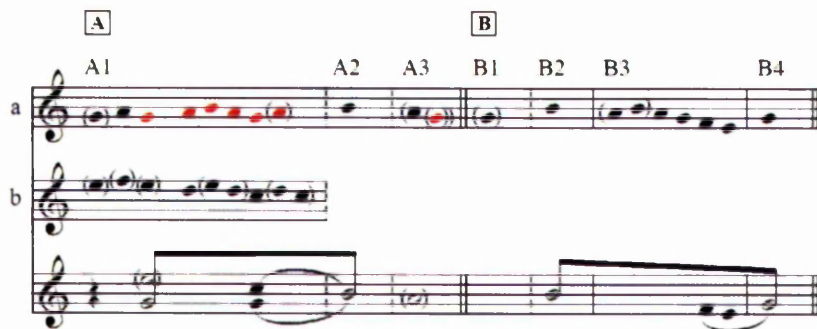
The melodic grouping in C2-C3 is seen in A1a of P5. Although the final *G* (C4) is not emphasised in A3a of the *poyar*, it is nevertheless used occasionally to complete the phrase (Figure 5.30).

Figure 5.30: Comparison of Phrase C in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Abdul Korim

T4: Abdul Korim



P5: Abdul Korim



As well as this tight correlation between *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes, we also see the same tripartite phrasal structure and structural progression in Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's *tripodī* tunes: C-C in phrase A, C-E in phrase B, and G-G in phrase C (Figure 5.31). In fact, apart from the occasional (bracketed) notes in A2 of T4 (C-D), and in A2a of T3 (F, E-D), as well as the raised third in T4, the A phrases are essentially the same.

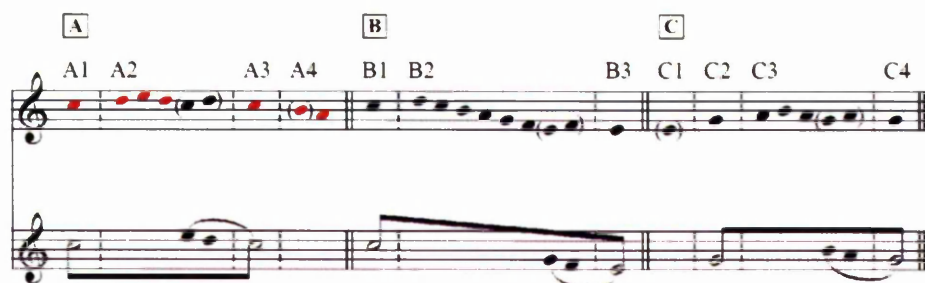
Phrase B in both *tripodī* tunes also shows the same general contour (Figure 5.32). They both descend from C to E, but, whereas Abdul Lotif leaps from A-C and then descends to E with a single cascade after G, Abdul Korim begins on C rises to D and then descends to E in one scalar motion. Both phrases show the same propensity to rise again from E to F before finally ending the phrase on E (B3, T4; B4, T3).

Both C phrases are almost exactly the same, apart from the omission of the flattened third in T4 (Figure 5.33). The occasional minor third leap from E to G at the



Figure 5.31: Comparison of Phrase A in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim



T3: Abdul Lotif



Figure 5.32: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim



T3: Abdul Lotif

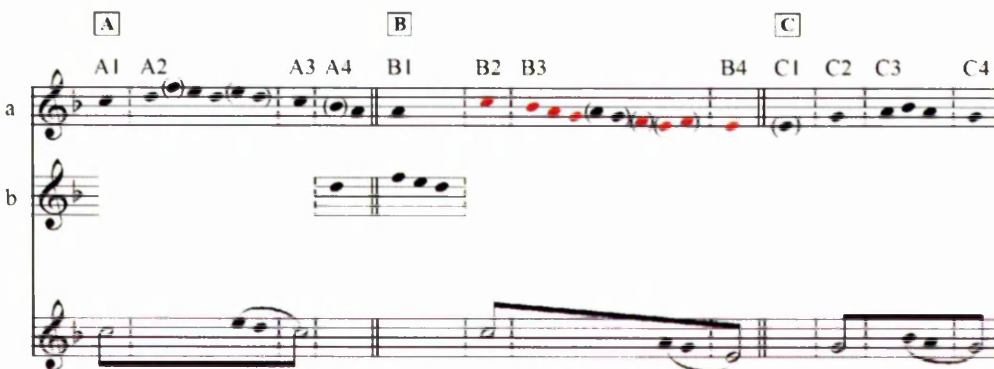
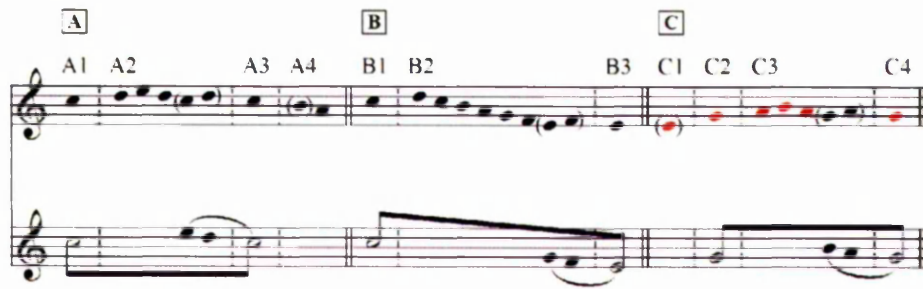


Figure 5.33: Comparison of Phrase C in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Abdul Korim with Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim



T3: Abdul Lotif



beginning of the phrase (C1-C2), followed by *A-B-A* and a return to the tonic in C4, is the same. Abdul Korim sometimes adds an additional *G-A* before the cadence in C3, but this is infrequent. It is Abdul Lotif's variation of category slots A4 and B1 in the 'b' line variation that represents the greatest difference.

The three melodic phrases of T4 parallel the tripartite structure of the *tripodī* line, perhaps more so than any of the *tripodī* tunes analysed so far. This is due to Abdul Korim's pausing after every phrase which emphasises their distinctiveness (see Table 5.10). Although he did this occasionally in his *Jongo Nama tripodī*, he more frequently joined phrases A and B together and read them as a single line. Although Abdul Korim pauses after each phrase, the shortest pause comes between phrases A and B, followed with the next longest pause between phrases B and C and, finally, the longest pause after phrase C. This not only parallels the structure of the *tripodī* line, but serves to highlight the poetic hierarchy. Melodically, the final note of each phrase is also distinguished by these pauses: *A* in phrase A, *E* in phrase B, and *G* in phrase C. While *A* is the final note of phrase A, however, it only finally rests on *A* for a moment

Table 5.10: Comparison of melodic and poetic structures in Mohobbot Nama tripodī (Abdul Korim)

Text Line	Mohobbot Nama tripodī (p.5) Rhyme underlined (main rhyme in bold)	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
12	इलकुबेर भोइन बीबी ° धाक़्केन ऐलाद्री बाबीः Iakuber bhoin <u>bibi</u> ° kanden elahi <b>bhabi</b> ः	A/a, B/a	A (pause) B (pause)	A, E
13	अनीन भाइन दुइ दान ॥ dhoria bhair dui <b>hat</b> ॥	C/b	C (pause)	G
14	ऐलाद्री ज़रबीन ज़र्रा ° शक़्कल त़ाहर ख़ेलाः Elahi almin <u>Alla</u> ° shokol tahar <b>khela</b> ः	A/c, B/c	A (pause) B (pause)	A, E
15	शुन भाइ भन पैदा बाज * shuno bhai mor ek <b>bat</b> *	C/b	C (pause)	G
16	जउबन ज़ाए फ़ुरी ° शमी बने अमी रारीः joubon jalae <u>furi</u> ° shami bine ami <b>rari</b> ः	A/a, B/a	A (pause) B (pause)	A, E
17	पुत्रनु भाइ ज़रबी ब़गाबीनी ॥ putru nai ami <b>obhagini</b> ॥	C/a	C (pause)	G
18	काक़ोर नोकर राख़ी ° ऐलाद्री म़ोहोले थ़ाकीः Cakor nokor <u>rakhi</u> ° ekla mohole <b>thaki</b> ः	A/a, B/a	A (pause) B (pause)	A, E
19	पुत्रनु भाइ बड़ कांग़ालीनी * putru nai boṛo <b>kaṅgalini</b> *	C/a	C (pause)	G

at the very end of the phrase, while C of category slot A3 is emphasised more so by its long duration. The E of phrase B is also only very briefly sounded, and, although none of the notes is held appreciably longer than the others, B is noticeably shorter than the other two melodic phrases. The final tonic of the *tripodī* tune (G, C4) is emphasised both by duration and repetition, firmly closing the *tripodī* line (whereas phrases A and B were left open).

Although there are some (minor) differences between Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's *tripodī* tunes (as there were between their *poysars*), the similarities are great. We can, therefore, tender the same conclusion: that they are both referring to the same basic schema in their reading of the *Mohobbot Nama tripodī boyans*. On the basis of the evidence so far—that all three *Mohobbot Nama poyar* tunes indicate the use of the same basic schemas, as do the first two *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* tunes—we might reasonably expect Montazil Ali's *tripodī* tune to follow suit.

*Example T5: Montazil Ali's Tripodī (CD/T5)*

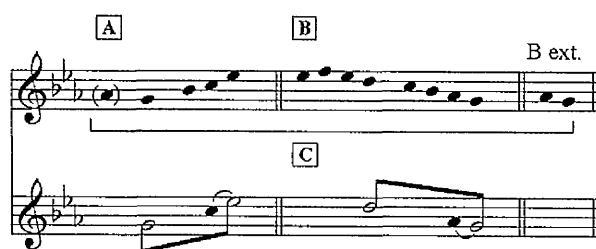
Like all the other *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* schemas considered so far, Montazil Ali's *tripodī*<sup>41</sup> shows three distinct melodic phrases—A, B, and C, although this contrasts with his *Jongo Nama tripodī* schema in T2 (Figure 5.34).

Figure 5.34: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Jongo Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali

T5: Montazil Ali



T2: Montazil Ali

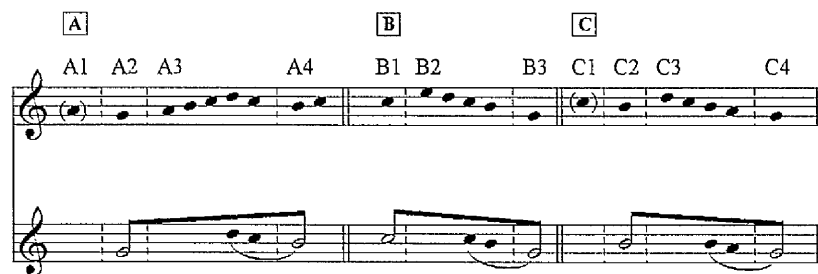


In contrast to the previous two *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* schemas (T3 and T4), we see a different structural progression in each of the melodic phrases (Figure 5.35). T5 shows phrase A moving through category slots *G* and *B*, phrase B through *C* and *G*, and phrase C through *B* and *G*. Only two stable category slots are the same: B1 (*C*) and C4 (*G*), the beginning and ending of phrase B and phrase C respectively. The scale is the same as in T4 (*khamaj*), and *G* is the tonic in all three examples.

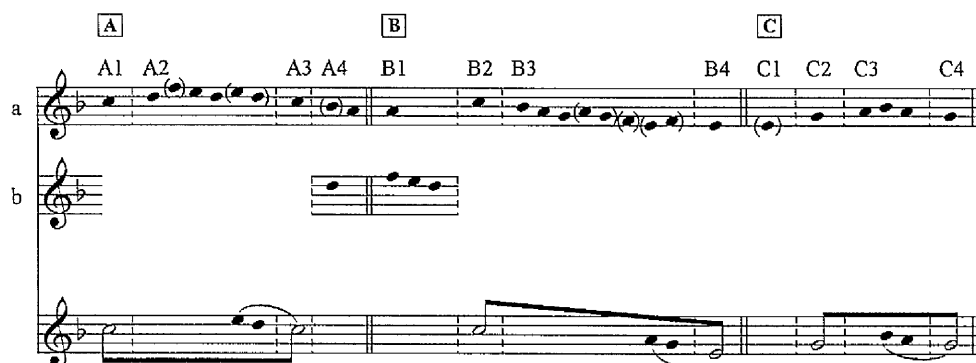
<sup>41</sup> This schema has been transposed down a minor third for easy comparison with the other two *tripodī* schemas. It is a semitone greater than the stated transposition of Montazil Ali's *poṃar* (a major second), but it was during that example that the overall pitch rose a semitone. The final note of the *poṃar* and the first note of the *tripodī* are in fact the same pitch.

Figure 5.35: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

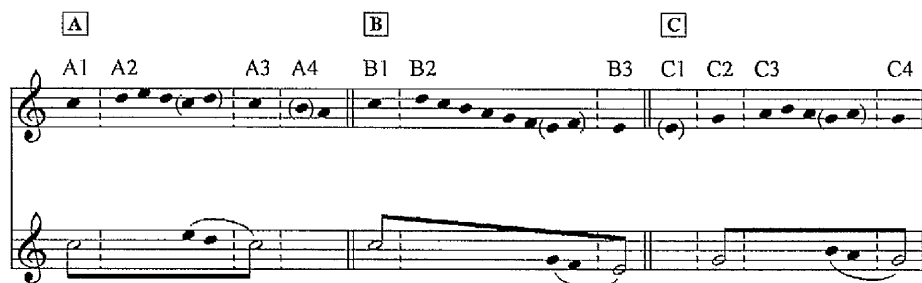
T5: Montazil Ali



T3: Abdul Lotif



T4: Abdul Korim



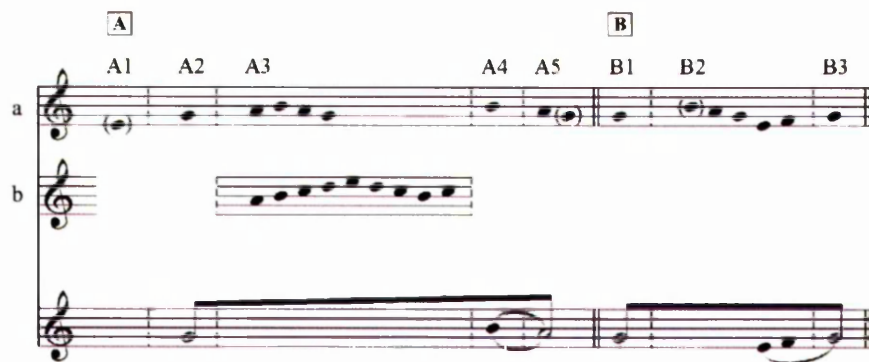
The scale and tonic that Montazil Ali uses here are also the same as those used in his *pozar* (Figure 5.36)—a trait of the *tripodī-pozar* comparisons in the previous two examples. The pitch range is also smaller than that used in the *pozar* (a major sixth as opposed to an octave), a feature of all of the *tripodī* tunes considered so far (with the exception of example T1).

Figure 5.36: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali

T5: Montazil Ali



P6: Montazil Ali

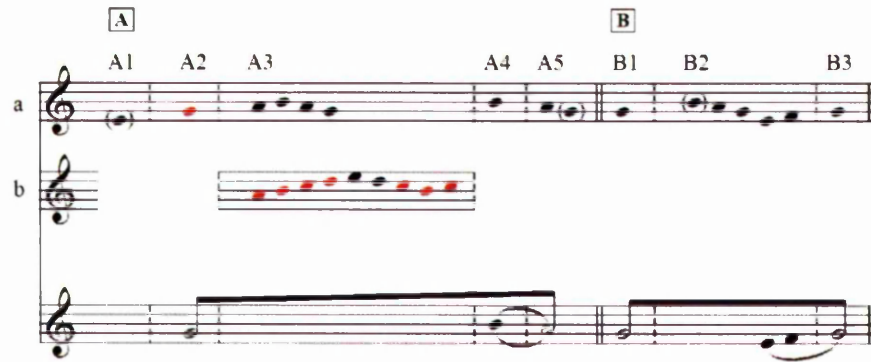


Breaking down Montazil Ali's *tripodī* phrase by phrase, we find a correlation in the contours of his *tripodī* phrase A and his *poyar* phrase A, variation line 'b' (Figure 5.37). In fact, apart from the downward anacrusis at the beginning of the phrase (A-G, instead of E-G which has the same function in the opposite direction in P6), and the two notes (E-D) at the apex of the arch in A3b of P6, the pattern of notes (G-A-B-C-D-C-B-C) in A2-A4 in the *tripodī* can also be seen in A2a-A3b of the *poyar*.

Figure 5.37: Comparison of Phrase A in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali

T5: Montazil Ali

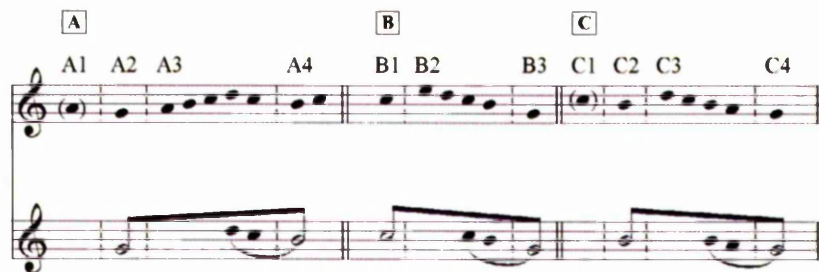




The direction of the melodic movement and the structural categories in phrase A of Montazil Ali's *tripodī*, however, are different from phrase A of the previous two *tripodī* examples (Figure 5.38). As noted above, T3 and T4 begin and end structurally on C (A1-A3) which creates a melodic arch contour in-between. In most cases the final note descends to A, a minor third below (A4a and A4 respectively), but this is only as the final syllable tails off. In contrast, phrase A of example T5 rises from G to D before descending to B (in what could be described as a rising arch contour). Here, B is prolonged (in the same way as C is prolonged in A3 of T3 and T4) before it rises a semitone to end the phrase momentarily on C, which anticipates the beginning note of phrase B.<sup>42</sup>

Figure 5.38: Comparison of Phrase A in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

T5: Montazil Ali



<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that in A4b of T3 the final note of phrase A also occasionally rises rather than descending as in A4a. Where the phrase does descend to A in A4a, however, this also anticipates the beginning of phrase B.



T3: Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim

B1 and B2 can, perhaps, be tenuously linked to A3b of the *pozar* again; that is if the first two and last notes of A3b are omitted, the ascending *D*, and final *C* (Figure 5.39). (The *G* in B3 of T5 can be seen in A5a of P6, but it is not consecutive.) The major third downward leap between *B* and *G* (B2-B3) in the *tripodī* is not a feature of the *pozar*, although it can be seen in reverse (*G-B*) in B1-B2 of P6. Although the pitches are different between phrase B of the *tripodī* and the *pozar*, a closer look at their contours reveal similarities. Both begin with an upward leap of a third (albeit occasionally in the *pozar*), followed by a stepwise descent (four notes in B2 of T5; three in B2 of P6) and a downward leap of a third. While this ends phrase B in the *tripodī*, the *pozar* ascends a third again (*E-F-G*) to complete the phrase.

It is the contour of phrase B that again shows the most similarity to the other two *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* B phrases (Figure 5.40). This contour could, perhaps, be described as a descending arch contour, as the melodic motion rises for one note before descending from the apex down to the final note. In the case of T5, the initial rise is in fact a leap of a major third from *C* to *E*, followed by a four note step-wise decent from *E* to *B*, and a downward leap of another major third from *B* to the tonic (*G*). *C* is also the starting note of phrase B in T4. The initial rise here, however, is a



tone to *D*, followed by a seven note scalic descent from *D* to *E*. *E* is the final note of the phrase. T3 shows a similar initial leap of a third but from *A* to *C*. The descent from *C* is a six note scalic movement to *E*.

Figure 5.39: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Poyar: Montazil Ali

T5: Montazil Ali



P6: Montazil Ali

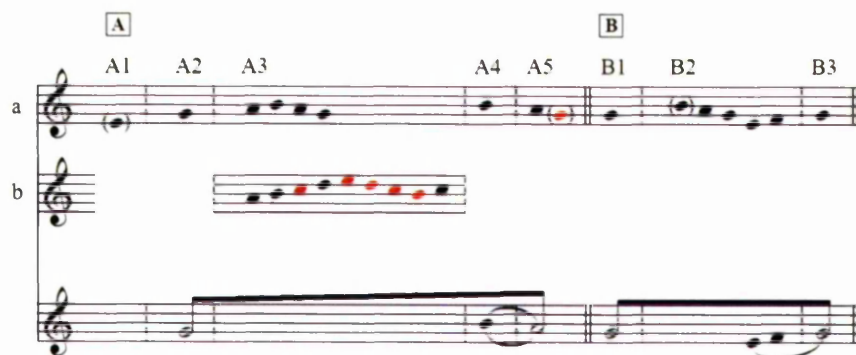


Figure 5.40: Comparison of Phrase B in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali with Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim

T5: Montazil Ali



T3: Abdul Lotif



T4: Abdul Korim



Apart from *G* being their final note, and that all three *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* C phrases show the same downward cadence from *B-G* (*Bb-G* in T3), there is little similarity between Montazil Ali's *tripodī* phrase C, and Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's (similarly between phrase C of his *tripodī* and phrase B of his *poṃar*). Phrase C, however, is an almost perfect mirror of phrase A in the same schema (Figure 5.41). C1 and C2 mirror A4 (with *B* as the stable category slot), while C4 mirrors A2 (*G*). Apart from the final *C* of A3, this category slot mirrors C3 exactly. *A* in A1 is not mirrored, but in terms of its function as an anacrusis, it is paralleled by *C* in C1. In terms of contour, C2 and C3 parallel B1 and B2 of phrase B—a leap of a third followed by a step-wise descent of four notes. Whereas B3 is a leap of a third downwards, C4 is a step of just a tone; both, however, end on the tonic.

Figure 5.41: Comparison of Phrase C-A in Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali



Like his *tripodī* in *Jongo Nama*, and Abdul Lotif's *Mohobbot Nama tripodī*, Montazil Ali combines phrases A and B in performance as a single melodic line (see Table 5.11).

Table 5.11: Comparison of melodic and poetic structures in *Mohobbot Nama Tripodī* (Montazil Ali)

Text Line	Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (pp.19-20) Rhyme underlined (main rhyme in bold)	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
23	હુસુફરે બહાઈ શહે • ફાતરે પેશીત જહેઃ Iusufer bhai <u>shobe</u> • kuate felia <u>jobe</u> ઃ	A/a, B/a	A B (pause)	C, G
24	તશી કાદો જની ખાશ્કે વાહે ॥ ashi kohe dhori khaise <b>baghe</b> ॥	C/a	C (pause)	G
25	શામુન પેગામ્બરે • વાઘ જની તને પનેઃ Iakub pegambore • bagh dhori ane <u>pore</u> ઃ	A/a, B/a	A B (pause)	C, G
1	કાન્દી કાન્દી કાન્દીવાન તાગે* kandi kandi kohibar <b>lage</b> *	C/a	C (pause)	G
2	શુન નીદારુન વાઘ • કીરુપે કોરિલા રાગઃ shuno nidarun <u>bagh</u> • kirupe korila <u>rag</u> ઃ	A/b, B/b	A B (pause)	C, G
3	કી બુકો ખાશ્કે હુસુફરે ॥ ki buke khaile <b>Iusufre</b> ॥	C/a	C (pause)	G
4	કેમોને જોરો દોરો • કી બુકો કાટિલે દોરોઃ kemone dhorite hate • ki buke katile <u>date</u> ઃ	A/a, B/a	A B (pause)	C, G
5	માએ કીસુ ના લાગિલો તોરે* maea kisu na lagilo <b>tore</b> *	C/a	C (pause)	G

His ending on G creates a closed ending to the internal rhyme also seen in his *Jongo Nama tripodī*, but which contrasts with the open ending in the previous two *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* examples. Although there is no break in the melodic line in between phrases A and B, the final syllable is prolonged in the first part of the *tripodī* line on the final stable category note of phrase A which is a pause 'of kind' and serves to distinguish the two phrases (A and B). In every instance in Montazil Ali's *tripodī*, the prolonged note is B (A4, T5) which rises to C at the very end to anticipate the beginning of phrase B. This melodic pause (if we can call it that) can be seen in all the other *tripodī* tunes as well. The more obvious pauses, however, are the pauses that break up the melodic phrases with silence. In all the *tripodī* examples considered so far, the first main pause comes after the second part of every tripartite *tripodī* line. As noted earlier, this corresponds with the first written line of the *puthi* (lines 23, 25, 2, and 4 in Table 5.11). In most cases, the final syllable is not prolonged melodically. The second pause is usually longer, always following the third and final part of the

*tripodī* line and, in all of the *tripodī* examples, the tonic is established both by repetition and melodic prolongation (lines 24, 1, 3, and 5 in Table 5.11).

Although some similarities do exist between Montazil Ali's *tripodī* and *pojar* schemas, they do not reveal the same level of correlation between melodic groupings as the two previous *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* examples did with their *pojars* (and also as Abdul Korim's *Jongo Nama tripodī* did to his *Jongo Nama pojars*). Consequently, as all three of the *Mohobbot Nama pojars* were very similar, and as the previous two *tripodī* schemas were closely related to their *pojars*, T5 does not bear as much relation to T3 and T4 as they do to each other. It is his three-phrase melodic structure and its parallel text-tune concurrency that makes Montazil Ali's *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* most like the others. And yet, ironically, as far as its melodic contour is concerned, it is more like the two-phrase *tripodī* he uses in *Jongo Nama*.

Having now considered the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes from *Jongo Nama* and *Mohobbot Nama* read by Abdul Lotif, Abdul Korim, and Montazil Ali, certain patterns appear to be emerging. Apart from minor variations, Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's schemas for both *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, in both *puthis*, are 'the same'. Further, although I do not have an example of Abdul Lotif's *Jongo Nama tripodī*, a comparison between his *Mohobbot Nama pojars* and *tripodī* tunes exposes the same high correlation between melodic groupings as those seen between Abdul Korim's *Jongo Nama* and *Mohobbot Nama pojars* and *tripodī* tunes. In the analysis of his *Jongo Nama* schemas, Montazil Ali was the exception that challenged the assumption of a specific tune being used for a specific *puthi*. It was, therefore, surprising to learn that Montazil Ali's *Mohobbot Nama pojars* was, basically, the same as Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's. In the light of this, it was equally surprising to discover that his *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* was not also the same. Nevertheless, we can note the following trends: first, that each reader uses a different schema to read each *puthi* (as claimed); and second, that while Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim seem to reference one, more abstract, schema in constructing both their *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, Montazil Ali uses two independent schemas.

In terms of the wider issues, regarding the musical culture and 'musicality' of *puthi-pora*, those noted at the end of the previous section also apply here. Two of the scales used in the reading of *Jongo Nama*—*khamaj* and *kaphi*—are also used to read

*Mohobbot Nama*, which adds further weight to *puthi-pora*'s suggested congruence with Bengali musical culture. In addition, the pitch ranges of the individual tunes are just as large in *Mohobbot Nama* as they are in *Jongo Nama*: from a major sixth to a minor tenth (with all of the notes used). We now turn to look at the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes from our final *puthi*, *Halotun Nobi*, to consider whether the patterns and trends observed in the schemas of the previous two *puthis* will be confirmed or contradicted.

### ***Halotun Nobi*: 'Account of the Prophet'**

In *Halotun Nobi*, we find a compositional structure that differs from the previous two *puthis*. Apart from a single *tripodī boyan*—which comes immediately after one of the most popular *pojar* sections in the *puthi* (*Meherajer Boyan*)—it is composed entirely of *pojar*. Only on a couple of occasions do the *pojar boyans* exceed 10 pages, but, as the *tripodī boyan* accounts for fewer than 4 of the 271 pages, taken together, there are many more consecutive pages of *pojar* before and after the *tripodī boyan* than even in *Jongo Nama*. Bearing this in mind, as we come to analyse the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes from *Halotun Nobi*, we might expect to find some kind of device in the *pojar* schemas used by the readers, either by way of melodic variation or in the asymmetry of melodic and poetic structures, in order to create momentum and sustain interest in the reading (of a kind that was seen in *Jongo Nama*). We might also ask whether each reader uses a specific *tripodī* schema just to read this one *boyan* or whether the tune is one used in another *puthi* (or based on the same schema as the *pojar*). In attempting to answer these questions, we will again look at *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes used by three readers: two familiar readers, Montazil Ali and Abdul Korim; and a new one, Boshir Ahmed.<sup>43</sup> We begin with Montazil Ali's *pojar*.

#### *Example P7: Montazil Ali's Pojar (CD/P7)*

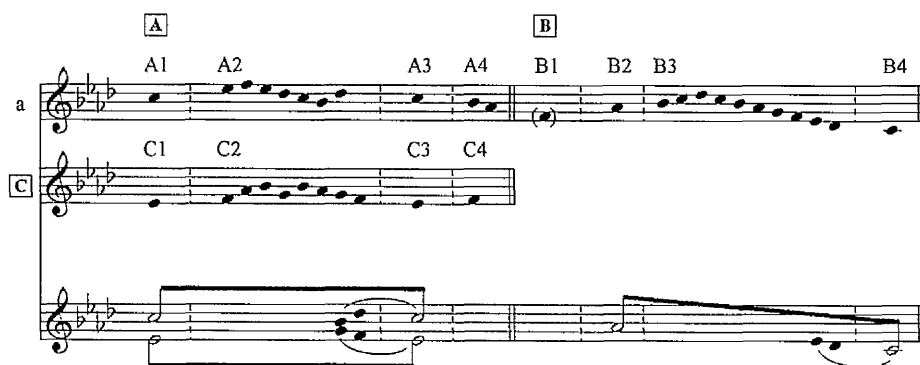
A feature of Montazil Ali's *pojar* tunes is consistency. This is seen both in his ability to reproduce almost identical melodic phrases, and in his use of these phrases at the structural level. His *Halotun Nobi pojar* (P7, Figure 5.42) demonstrates these two

<sup>43</sup> Although I have a recording of Abdul Lotif reading a *pojar* from *Halotun Nobi*, I do not have him reading more than one couplet line of the *tripodī boyan*. I, therefore, selected Boshir Ahmed's tunes in his place. It was during the reading of this *puthi* (in the February 21 event) that Abdul Lotif corrected Boshir Ahmed's reading (of both tunes) and took the *puthi* away from him (during the *pojar*).

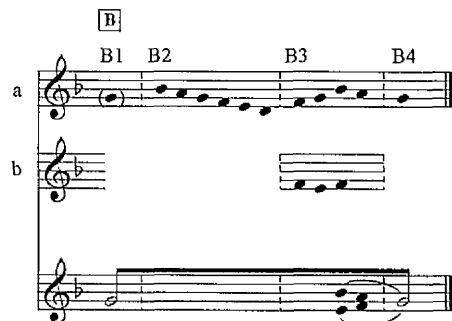
aspects very clearly. The single bracketed note-head in B1 shows that there is little ambiguity or internal variation in his schema. Structurally, he alternates between phrases ABCB without exception. The central tone of the *pozar* tune is C, which indicates the use of *bhairavi* (the same scale Montazil Ali used in his *Jongo Nama tripodi*). The overall pitch range is extremely large—a major eleventh, from F (A2a) to C (B4), an octave and a fourth below. Phrase B has an individual range of a minor ninth (Db down to C, B2-B3). In his previous *pozar* tunes, Montazil Ali had not exceeded an octave.

Figure 5.42: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobī Pozar, Jongo Nama Pozar, and Mohobbot Nama Pozar: Montazil Ali

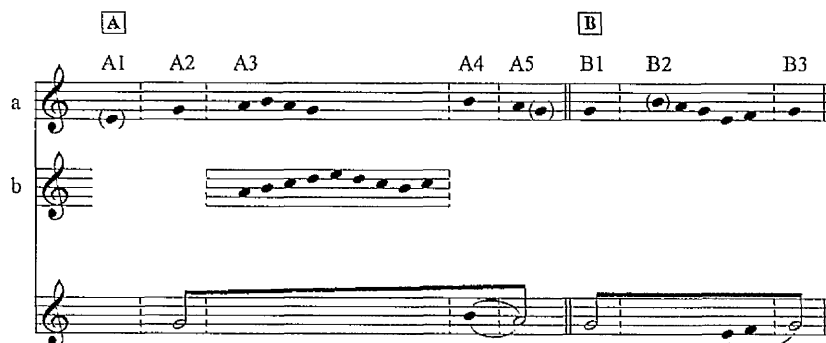
P7: Montazil Ali



P3: Montazil Ali



P6: Montazil Ali



Somewhat unusually in the *poyar* examples considered so far, rather than two variations of phrase A ('a' and 'b'), Montazil Ali introduces an independent phrase C. These two phrases have their own internal structure, melodic contour, and begin and end on different degrees of the scale. I have left the schematic format the same, with C in vertical alignment with A, because, as far as performance is concerned, phrases A and C alternate with phrase B, one after the other, and, therefore, operate in relation to B in the same way—ABCB, ABCB, etc. The impression generated in performance is that of a four-phrase melodic structure (see Table 5.12).

Table 5.12: Four-phrase melodic structure (Montazil Ali)

Text Line	Halotun Nobi Poyar (p.115) <i>Couplet rhyme underlined</i>	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
2	પનચાશ્ત્ર બરોડ તીન માશ ઉમ્મર પુરિતે ॥ poncash boros tin mash ummor purite ॥	A/a	A (cont.)	A
3	મેહેરાજે ગેલા નોબી આલર હુકુમેતે* Meheraje gela nobi Allar hukumete*	B/a	B (pause)	C
4	ફેરે ફીરી ફીમા ફાપા ફાશ્તા ફીરીફાપે ॥ ete firi sina siko koila firishtaē ॥	A/b	C (cont.)	F
5	જમીન પાને તદ્દગામે જાશ્વાન દાપે* jomin hone asmane jaibar daē*	B/b	B (pause)	C
6	ફીમા ચીની દીન પાપી પામી દીન પાપે ॥ sina ciri dilo fari pani dia dhoe ॥	A/c	A (cont.)	A
7	તદ્દગામે જાશ્તે જેલા હીમોત બોરાપે* asmane jaite jela himmot borāē*	B/c	B (pause)	C
8	દેખીલા આલર નુર તોજોલિર શાત ॥ dekhiba Allar nur tojollir shat ॥	A/d	C (cont.)	F
9	તદ્દગામી ફીરીફા દેખીલા પાત જાત* asmani firishta dekhiba koto jat*	B/d	B (pause)	C

Phrase A marks the first line of this four-part structure strongly by starting on the tonic (A1a) and emphasising it through prolongation in A3a. Bb and Ab, notes of half the duration of C (A4a), are used to link phrases A and B together into a single melodic line. Therefore, while phrase A has a largely closed ending its final two notes open it up again as it leads into phrase B, anticipating its first stable note (A, B2). The contour used in this melodic line is axial (around the tonic). Phrase C, starts and ends on Eb, the third, and is, as a consequence, a much weaker phrase than phrase A in the overall melodic structure. C4 shows F to be the actual final note of the category slot but, as with C in phrase A, Eb is emphasised in terms of the internal phrasal structure as the final note by a longer duration (C3). F is similarly used to link phrases C and B

together as a continuous melodic line, anticipating the *F* of B1. Ending on either *Eb* or *F* creates an open ending to this variation. The contour used here is a melodic arch. It is worth noting that all the leaps used in both of these melodic lines are minor thirds, which undoubtedly contribute to the minor ‘feel’ of this *pozar* tune. Ascending minor thirds are a feature of *bhairavi* raga, in which ascending lines typically go *C-Eb-F-(G)* and *F-Ab-Bb-(C)*.

Phrase B—apart from the *F* of B1, which only follows phrase A—is entirely conjunct, running from *Ab* up to *Db*, and then through every note of the scale down to *C*, a minor ninth below. Other than *Ab* at the beginning and *C* at the end of the phrase, Montazil Ali emphasises the flattened seventh and fifth scale degrees (*Bb* and *G*), by repeating them in the downward progression. As mentioned above, phrase B is heard every other line, attached alternately to phrase A or phrase C, so as to create a single-breathed melodic line. He also pauses at the end of every B phrase, which emphasises the bipartite poetic structure of the *pozar* couplet. His pause is longer, however, after the C-B melodic line (after the second couplet) which adds emphasis to the four-phrase melodic structure.

It is significant to note, in summary, that this *pozar* schema is distinct from the schemas Montazil Ali used to read *pozar boyans* in the previous two *puthis*. Here, again, we see the claims of the readers for specific tunes upheld. From Montazil Ali’s consistent melodic and performative reinforcement of the *pozar*’s bipartite structure, however, it is clear that he does not use melodic-poetic tension as a way of generating momentum in his reading. Instead, and in contrast to the tunes he used to read *pozar boyans* from the other two *puthis*, he uses an additional melodic line (*C*, rather than a variation of *A*, which creates a four-phrase structure) and a much larger pitch range (a major eleventh), combined with a more complex rhythm,<sup>44</sup> in order to sustain interest. We move on to consider the second *Halotun Nobil pozar* tune read by Boshir Ahmed to see if any of these features can be found here, too. Because I do not have examples of Boshir Ahmed reading the other two *puthis*, I will not be able to determine whether his *pozar* schema is specific to *Halotun Nobil* or not.

<sup>44</sup> Rhythm can also be analysed in schematic terms (see Snyder 2000:159-91), but it is far beyond the scope of this chapter to do so. Listening to the audio example (CD/P7), however, is enough to reveal the use of occasional syncopation (in the form of dotted quavers and triplets) and a faster tempo than Montazil Ali employed in the *pozar boyans* from the previous two *puthis*.

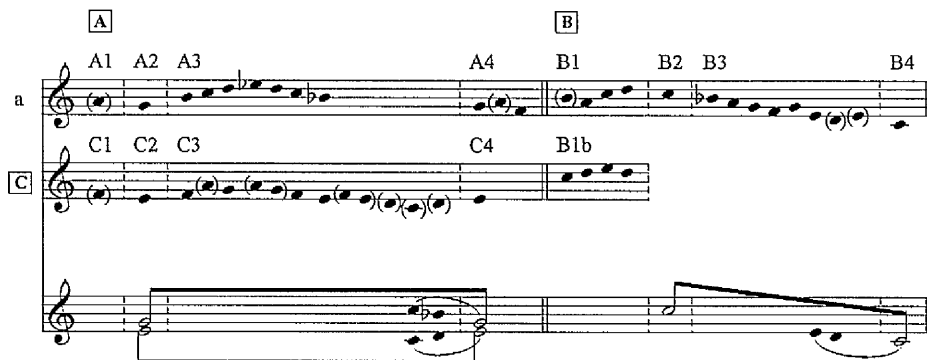


*Example P8: Boshir Ahmed's Poyar (CD/P8)*

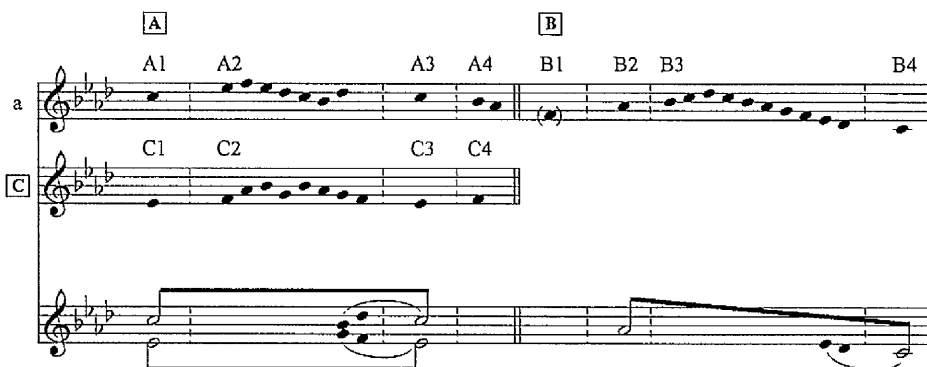
In contrast to the previous example, Boshir Ahmed's *poyar*<sup>45</sup> shows both a lack of melodic and structural consistency of the kind noted above (Figure 5.43). The quantity of bracketed note-heads in P8 (particularly in C3) shows that there is ambiguity and internal variation in Boshir Ahmed's melodic phrases. While phrase B alternates in the same way as it does in P7, phrases A and C do not always alternate in turn. C, however, is the tonic;<sup>46</sup> but, in contrast to P7, P8 uses a different scale—*khamaj*—with chromatic alterations on the third and seventh degrees of the scale (alterations which are also characteristic of the raga *khamaj*). These occur only in A3a where the first *B* is natural and the upper *E* flattened. As the melody descends from the flattened *E*, the final *B* is also flattened. All other instances of the seventh and third degrees of the scale are flattened and natural respectively. The pitch range here is similarly large: a major tenth, just a semitone less than P7.

Figure 5.43: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobī Poyar: Boshir Ahmed with Montazil Ali

P8: Boshir Ahmed



P7: Montazil Ali



<sup>45</sup> This schema has been transposed up a minor second for easy comparison with the previous example.

<sup>46</sup> C is taken to be the tonic as it is emphasised in the stable structural categories of phrase B (B2, B4).

Like Figure P7, phrases A and C of P8 have an independent internal structure, melodic contour, and begin and end on different degrees of the scale. Phrase A in P8, however, is quite different from phrase A in P7. For a start, the phrase begins and ends on the fifth (*G*) as opposed to the tonic (*C*). Although *A* and *F* follow *G* in A4, *G* is emphasised through prolongation. *A* is only rarely heard, and although *F* is the final note of the phrase, it is only touched upon for the briefest moment. The contour here, again in contrast to P7, is a melodic arch instead of an axial contour. Phrase C in P8, however, is more similar to phrase C of P7 in starting and ending on the third scale degree (although *E* is not flattened in P8). If all notes in phrase C of P8 are used, the melodic contour is axial; if only those notes which are not bracketed, it forms a melodic arch. Most of the lines, however, do reveal an axial contour. Both phrases A and C have open endings (phrase C more so, ending on the third).

Phrases A and C are always followed by phrase B, A4a with B1a and C4 with B1b without exception. While the *C* of B2 is not emphasised by repetition or through prolongation, it is the note which is passed through by both B1a and B1b. Phrase B in P8 does not show the same step-wise progression as P7, but the same general contour is in operation in both—an ascent to an apex (*D* in B1a, *E* in B1b) and then a descent of over an octave to *C* (B4). *G* and *E*, the fifth and third degrees of the scale, are emphasised in B3. These notes help establish the tonality of this *poyar* and anticipate the starting pitches of phrases A and C.

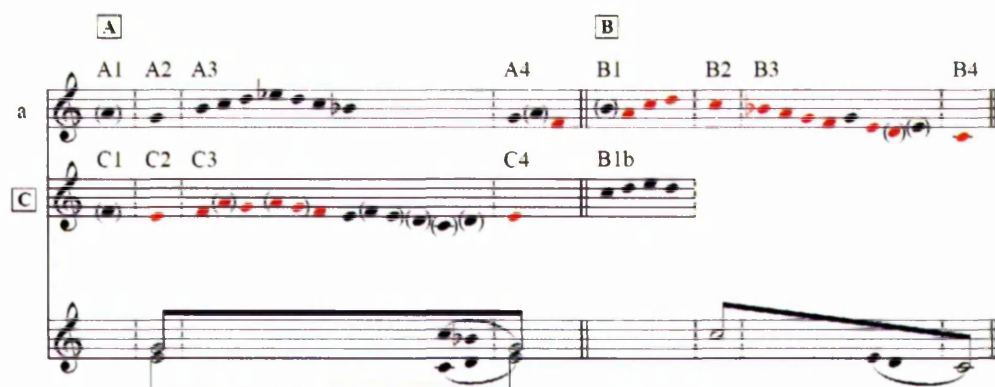
As mentioned above, phrase B is repeated every other line, as in P7. Phrases A and C, however, are not constantly alternated with B; phrase C is by far the most repeated line. This means, of course, that there is not the same predictable four-part phrasal structure here as there was in P7 (see Table 5.13). Boshir Ahmed tends to pause briefly at the end of every phrase—possibly to catch his breath—rather than pausing in order to emphasise the bipartite structure of the couplet as Montazil Ali did in the previous example. The tonic at the end of phrase B, however, is emphasised by repetition and prolongation. This creates a closed ending which does serve to mark the final rhyme in the second line of the couplet and which also functions to reinforce the *poyar's* poetic structure. Where Boshir Ahmed does pause for longer, he does so after phrase B. In every instance after he pauses, he begins the next line with phrase A.

Table 5.13: Emphasising the poetic structure through repetition and prolongation of the tonic (Boshir Ahmed)

Text Line	Halotun Nobi Poyar (p.115) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
12	મેહેરાજેન પાના જન મેળીવ તપ્પને ॥ meherajer kotha joto lekhibo okhone ॥	A/a	A	F
13	ઝઘાન ધુજુને મવી મેળીત પોશને * Allar hujure nobi gesilo kemone *	B/a	B	C (r.p.) <sup>47</sup>
14	પાન પાન વાન તીત પાશતા મેળેનાજ ॥ koto koto bat cito koila meheraj ॥	A/b	C	E
15	પાન પીનીફાન શાને પીનીતા મજાજ * koto firishtar shate porila nomaj *	B/b	B	C (r.p.)
16	બેહેશ્તો ધુજખ પીતા મેળીતા રઘુત ॥ Beheshto dujokho kila dekhila rosul ॥	A/c	C	E
17	ઝમ્મગાલી શબે પીતા પાનીતા પાવુત * asmani shobe kila korila kobul *	B/c	B	C (r.p.)
18	મેળીવ પેશવ પાના વડ મજાદાન ॥ lekhibo eshobo kotha boro mojadar ॥	A/d	C	E
19	શતાન વનપાતે ઝસા પાતાદી ઝમાન * ihar borkote asha khalasi amar *	B/d	B (l.pause) <sup>48</sup>	C (r.p.)

So, is Boshir Ahmed's *Halotun Nobi poyar* tune the same as Montazil Ali's? While there are some observable differences, not least the use of a different scale, and the use of the fifth (instead of the tonic) to begin phrase A, the use of two independent phrases, A and C—both beginning phrase C on the third degree of the scale, and using notes *F-A-G-A-G-F* in-between—and using the same generalised contour in phrase B, indicate significant similarities (Figure 5.44).

Figure 5.44: Comparison of Phrase C-B in Halotun Nobi Poyar: Boshir Ahmed with Montazil Ali  
P8: Boshir Ahmed



<sup>47</sup> 'r.p.' stands for repetition and prolongation.

<sup>48</sup> After this longer pause, Boshir Ahmed uses phrase A to read the following line (line 20, not shown).

Although the individual reader's schemas clearly contain some differences, the similarities lead us to conclude that they are both referencing a less specific, abstract (or generalised), schema.<sup>49</sup> In addition to the similarly large pitch range and complex rhythm, Boshir Ahmed's irregular alternation between phrases A and C and phrase B does create a greater expectancy in his reading than in Montazil Ali's consistent four-phrase structure, particularly the more frequent use of phrase C which is, melodically, a more open phrase than A. We turn now to compare both of these tunes with the last of the three *pyar* tunes from *Halotun Nobî*, read by Abdul Korim.

#### Example P9: Abdul Korim's *Poyar* (CD/P9)

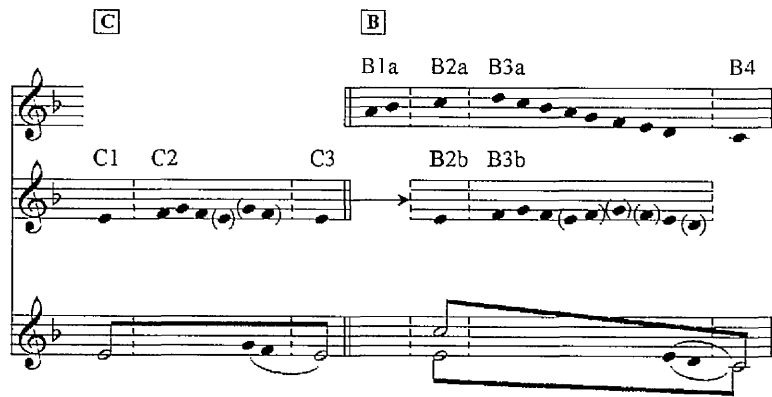
The difference between Abdul Korim's *pyar* schema and the previous two schemas is instantly apparent—there is no A phrase, but two B phrase variations (Figure 5.45). The number of bracketed note heads, like P8, shows that there is not a great amount of internal consistency to the order and number of pitches used within each phrase. C is established as the tonal centre, as the melodic lines in both B phrase variations end on C (B4). Apart from phrase B, variation line 'a' (used just four times in the recorded example), the pitch range is very small—a minor third in phrase C; a fifth in variation 'b' of phrase B, from C-G. If variation 'a' of phrase B is included, both ascending and descending scales appear to include Bb, the flattened seventh, and, therefore, suggests *khamaj*.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Many more examples would be needed before a reconstruction of such a schema could be attempted, however.

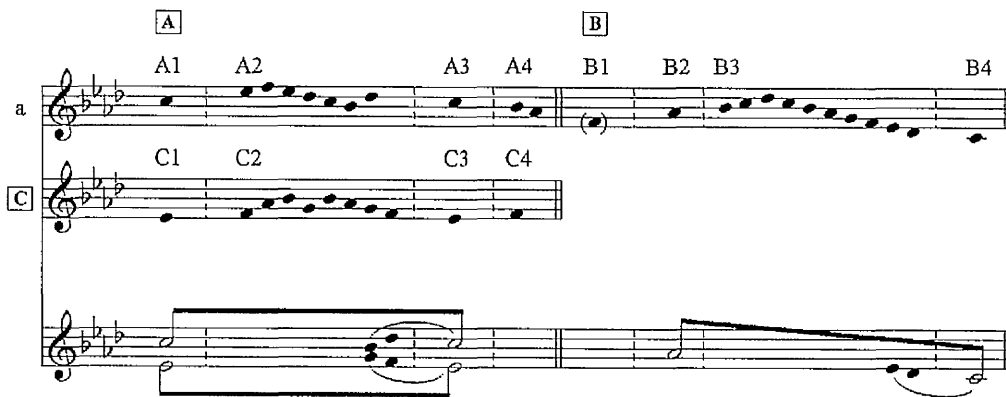
<sup>50</sup> The pitches are somewhat ambiguous, however, and because the pitch range of phrases C and B'b' only span a fifth, we only have these four lines to go on. *Khamaj* is the best approximation.

Figure 5.45: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobi Poyar: Abdul Korim with Montazil Ali and Boshir Ahmed

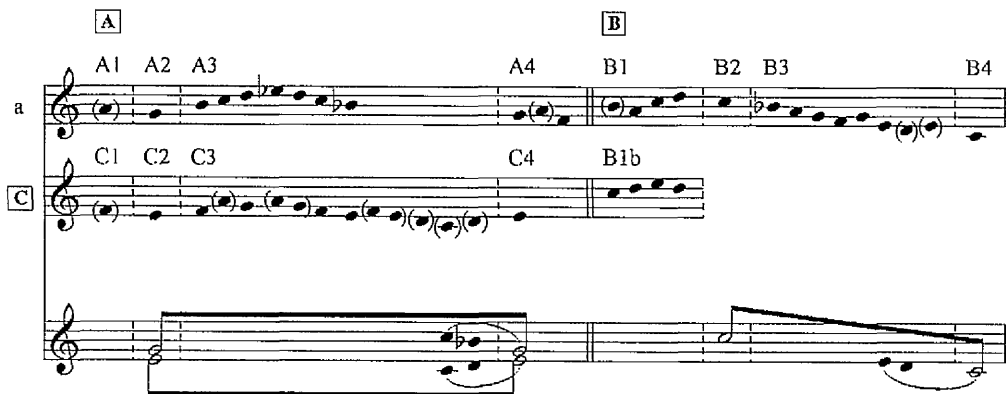
P9: Abdul Korim



P7: Montazil Ali



P8: Boshir Ahmed



The melodic structure is an alternation between phrases C and B (Table 5.14). Like the previous two *poyars*, phrase C begins and ends on the third (C1-C3), Phrase B' b' also begins on the third and alternates between three notes (E-F-G) before a final descent to the tonic (B4). Apart from the last two notes (D-C), this line is a replication

of phrase C (an exact replication if all the bracketed notes are removed), although the phrase B variation tends to use a double-arch contour, whereas phrase C generally uses a single melodic arch.

Table 5.14: *Emphasising the poetic structure through repetition and prolongation of the tonic (Abdul Korim)*

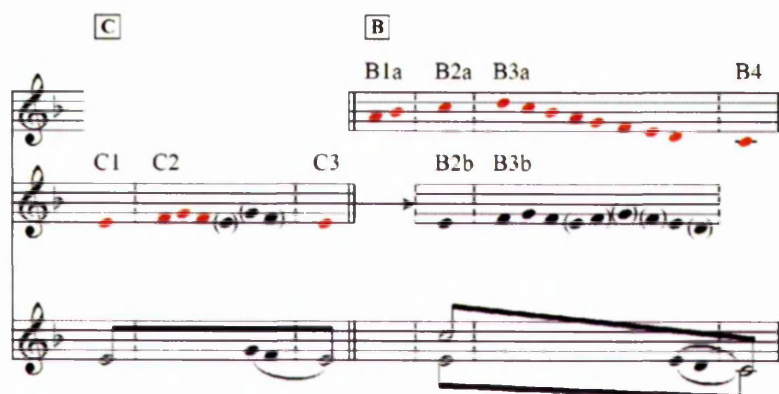
Text Line	Halotun Nobi Poyar (p.138) Couplet rhyme underlined	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
2	ऐता हने जवनीने नबी नशत जाऐ ॥ eta hone Jobrile nobi loia <u>jae</u> ॥	A/a	C (cont.)	E
3	शत आसमान सारी कठो दुरे जाऐ* shat asman sari koto dure <u>jae</u> *	B/a	B'b' (pause)	C (r.p.)
4	आरोशेर जुत गीत बेहेश्टो लागीने ॥ arosh'er juto gia beheshto lagise ॥	A/b	C (cont.)	E
5	बेहेश्टो जुत गीत उदरे उदरीने* Beheshtor juto gia upore <u>udise</u> *	B/b	B'b' (pause)	C (r.p.)
6	नुरेते बाजीत नुरे तरोंगो देखाऐ ॥ nurete bajia nure toroŋgo dekhae ॥	A/a	C (cont.)	E
7	देखी नबी पेगांभोर मने भोए पाऐ* dekhi nobi pegambor mone bhoe <u>pae</u> *	B/a	B'a' (pause)	C (r.p.)
8	ना तोले ना उदरे ना पुबे ना पोश्चिमे ॥ na tole na upore na pube na poshchime ॥	A/d	C (cont.)	E
9	कुथा हने कुथा अलो केबा तारे जाने* kutha hone kutha ailo keba tare <u>jane</u> *	B/d	B'b' (pause)	C (r.p.)

The structure of the *poyar* couplet is, therefore, only marginally reinforced melodically by the C-B phrasal alternation. The second line of the couplet, however, is emphasised at the end of phrase B (B4) by repetition and prolongation of the tonic, followed by a pause. Apart from the occasional use of phrase B'a', there is no additional melodic variation.

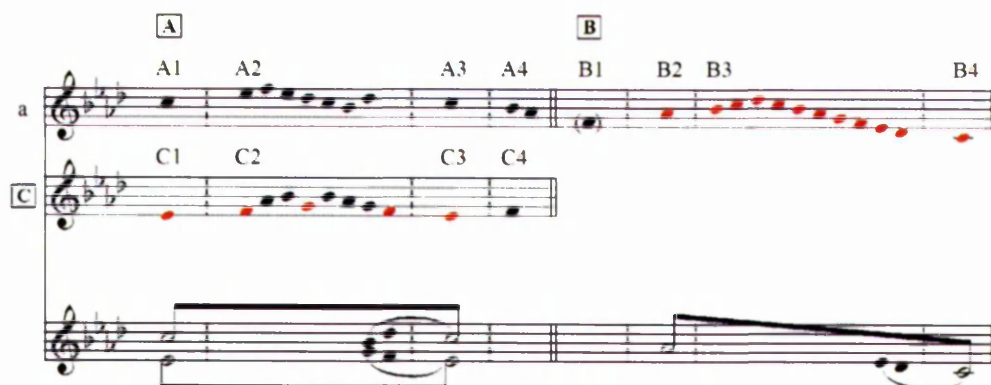
While the differences in this *poyar* tune seem even further removed from P8 than P7, there are aspects which also show notable similarities (Figure 5.46). This is particularly evident in the use of phrase C which begins and ends on the third, a feature only noted in these *Halotun Nobi poyar* tunes, and the use of notes E-F-G-F-E. Additionally, the melodic contour in variation line 'a' of phrase B, which ascends from A up to D, then runs all the way down to the tonic, a ninth below, is the same contour that is seen in phrase B of Figures P7 and P8.

Figure 5.46: Comparison of Phrase C-B in Halotun Nobi Poyar: Abdul Korim with Montazil Ali and Boshir Ahmed

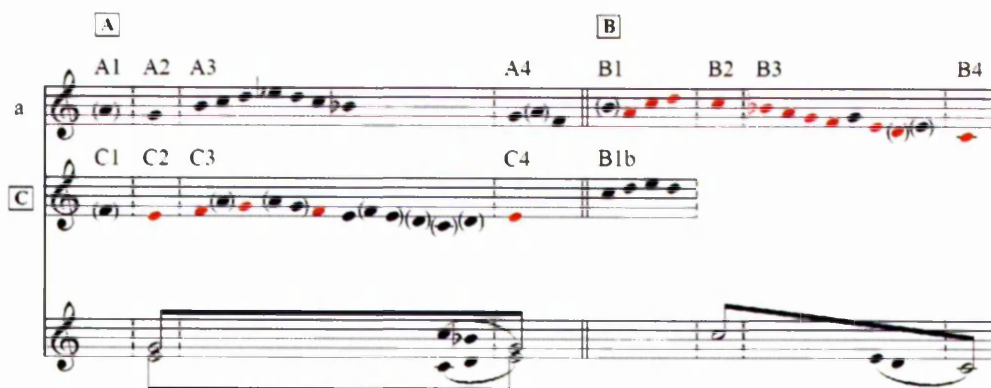
P9: Abdul Korim



P7: Montazil Ali



P8: Boshir Ahmed



It would appear, then, that Abdul Korim is reconstructing his individual tune for reading the *Halotun Nobi poyar boyans* from the same generalised schema used by the other two readers. Even though the similarities are not as strong as those seen between the three *Mohobbot Nama poyars*, they are enough to explain on what bases

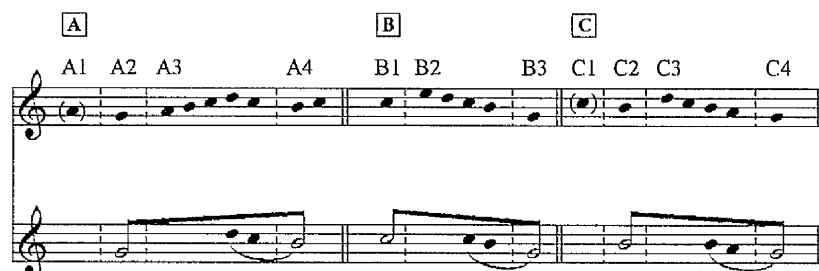
the readers may consider them to be the ‘same’, and one which differs from others. As we turn to look at the tunes these same readers used to read the single *tripodī boyan* from *Halotun Nobi*, the evidence from the previous two *puthis* suggests that they will not be the ‘same’. We will begin with Montazil Ali’s *tripodī*.

### Example T6: Montazil Ali’s Tripodī (CD/T6)

It is immediately plain that Montazil Ali’s *Halotun Nobi tripodī* schema is exactly the same as his *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* schema (Figure 5.47). In fact, the only difference between the two examples (apart from the text, of course), is the pitch level at which they were read (which is not a schematic element). All the essential features of this schema have, therefore, been discussed already.

Figure 5.47: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobi Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Montazil Ali

T6: Montazil Ali



T5: Montazil Ali<sup>51</sup>



As there was not a high level of correlation of melodic groupings between his *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes from *Mohobbot Nama*, however, it is possible that Montazil Ali’s *Halotun Nobi tripodī* has more connection with his *Halotun Nobi poyar*, so we will compare them briefly here. This process may also indicate whether the schema is

<sup>51</sup> This schema is represented here at pitch. Where it was considered earlier, it was transposed down a minor third in order to facilitate easier comparison with other examples.



‘attached’ to one of these *puthis* and ‘borrowed’ for the other (or *vice-versa*), or if, in fact, the tune is not linked to either in any definable way.

A cursory glance at the two schemas shown in T6 and P7 suggests a possible relationship between the tonal centres of each tune—*C* in the *pojar* and *G* in the *tripodī*—fifth to tonic (Figure 5.48). Although the example begins primarily with *C* as its tonal centre,<sup>52</sup> over the course of the whole example (some eleven minutes) the pitch of his reading gradually rises and the *pojar* ends on *E*, a major third higher than the starting pitch. There is also a break of around thirty seconds between the reading of the *pojar* and *tripodī* examples, by which time the final pitch of the *pojar* will have slipped out of short-term memory. Whether Montazil Ali is trying to establish a tonal relationship between these two tunes or not, however, there is a more obvious difference in the use of scale. In his *pojar*, Montazil Ali uses *bhairavi*; here, he uses *khamaj*.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the tonal centre of each respective tune, the scale provides the greater difference.

The use of different scales in these two tunes also affects the potential of there being an exact pitch correlation between melodic groupings. It will be more helpful to compare these two tunes in regard to their contours. The contour of phrase A in P7 is essentially axial (the final two notes of A3a descending briefly in anticipation of B1). This contour is not used in T6. The contour of phrase B (P7) is a descending melodic arch (I have described similar contours earlier). This type of generalised contour can be seen in both phrases B and C of T6, but their proportions—height of ascending and descending intervals and number of notes—are not comparable. The contour in phrase C of P7, a melodic arch with a central ‘dip’, also bears some resemblance to phrases A and B combined in T6, but, again, not in the same proportions.

These possible similarities notwithstanding, there is not sufficient evidence to say, with any certainty, whether Montazil Ali’s *tripodī* tune is inspired by his *Halotun Nobī* or *Mohobbot Nama pojār*. Nor is it necessary to do so. While both show some influences, these could just as well be generic features of *puthi-porā* (or other Bengali musical genres) as specific features of either. And, as noted above, Montazil Ali used

<sup>52</sup> I say ‘primarily’ because Montazil Ali actually began the *pojar* on *B*. Within the space of just two couplets, however, his reading had risen a semitone and *C* was established for a number of minutes as the tonal centre before the pitch gradually rose further.

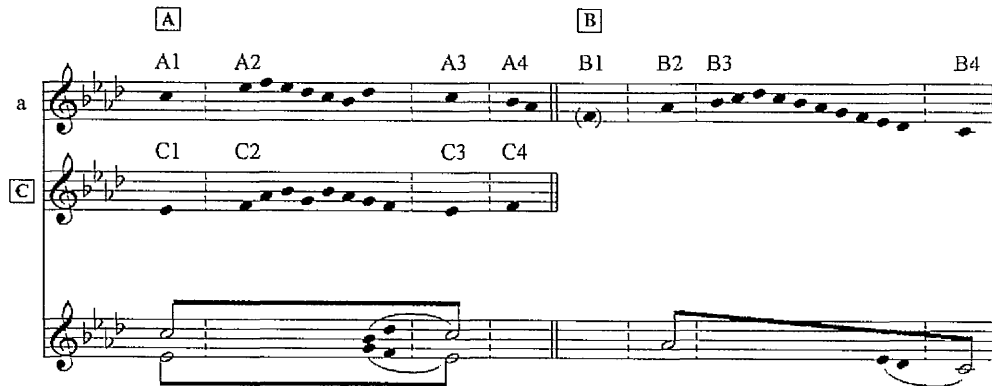
<sup>53</sup> Because Montazil Ali does not use the seventh in this example, it is impossible to be certain. This scale could equally be *bilaval* (like an unaltered ‘major’ scale), but I have suggested *khamaj* because it is used most frequently in the other examples (by Montazil Ali in his *Mohobbot Nama pojār*).

Figure 5.48: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobī Tripodī and Halotun Nobī Poyar:  
Montazil Ali

T6: Montazil Ali



P7: Montazil Ali



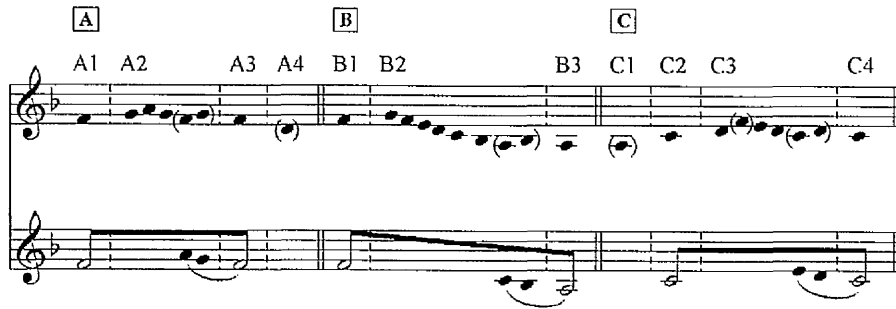
two independent schemas to read *poyar* and *tripodī boyans* in both *Jongo Nama* and *Mohobbot Nama*, so there is no reason to expect there to be any particular correlation in those used for *Halotun Nobī* either. What is significant is that it is the same *tripodī* schema used in both *Halotun Nobī* and *Mohobbot Nama*. To see whether this is more than Montazil Ali's peculiar selection, we turn next to have a look at Abdul Korim's *tripodī* tune.

*Example T7: Abdul Korim's Tripodī (CD/T7)*

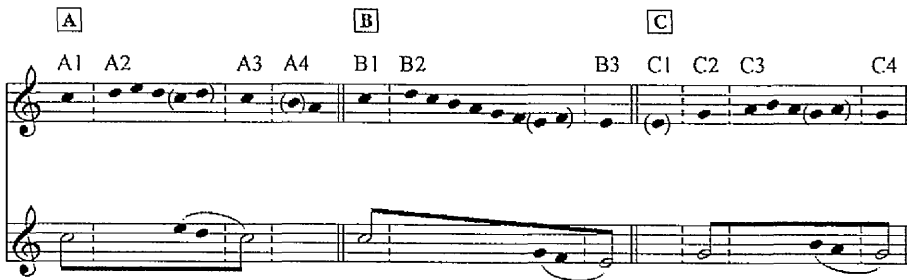
Again, apart from the pitch, Abdul Korim's *tripodī* schema<sup>54</sup> is almost exactly the same as the schema he uses to reconstruct his tune to read the *tripodī boyans* in *Mohobbot Nama* (T4). The only differences are found in category slots A4 and C3, but these are insignificant (Figure 5.49).<sup>55</sup>

Figure 5.49: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobi Tripodī and Mohobbot Nama Tripodī: Abdul Korim

T7: Abdul Korim



T4: Abdul Korim



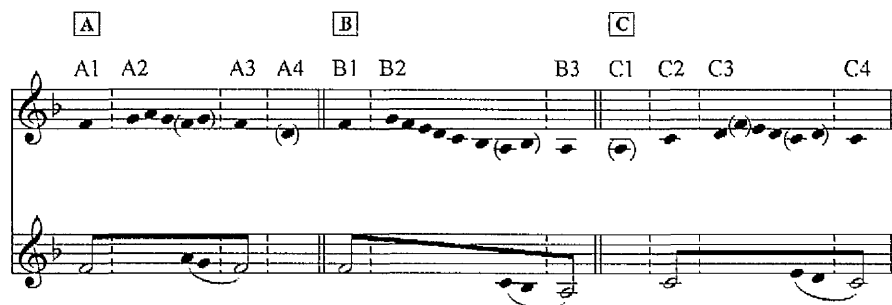
It was suggested above that Abdul Korim probably constructed his *Mohobbot Nama poyar* and *tripodī* schemas from the same, but more generalised schema. I will nevertheless compare his *Halotun Nobi tripodī* (T7) and *poyar* (P9) schemas, to see if any similarities also exist here (Figure 5.50).

<sup>54</sup> At pitch, this example begins on *F#* (A1) and ends on *C#* (C4). The *poyar* schema in Figure 5.15 was presented at pitch, beginning on *E* (A1) and ending on *C* (B4). There was a lapse of almost two and a half minutes between Abdul Korim's reading of the *tripodī* and the *poyar* examples (in which some questions were discussed) which more than compensates for the semitone difference in the ending note. This schema has been therefore been transposed down a minor second to show the same ending.

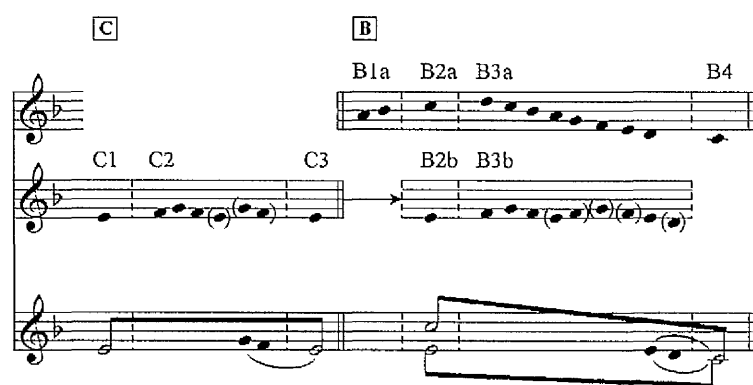
<sup>55</sup> I am considering Abdul Korim's *tripodī* before Boshir Ahmed's here (changing the order from their *poyars*), as the latter requires a greater depth of analysis. It is, therefore, better to consider it last.

Figure 5.50: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobī Tripodī and Halotun Nobī Poyar:  
Abdul Korim

T7: Abdul Korim



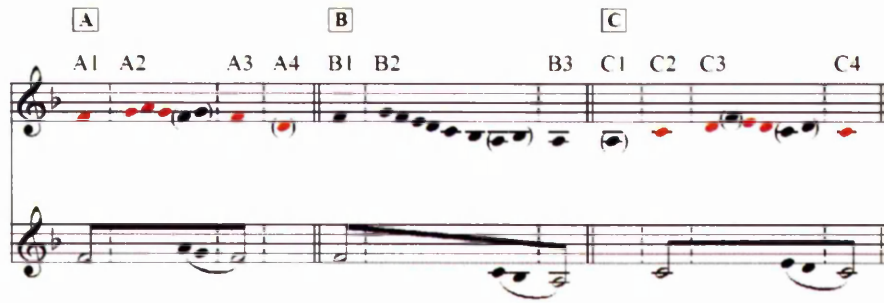
P9: Abdul Korim



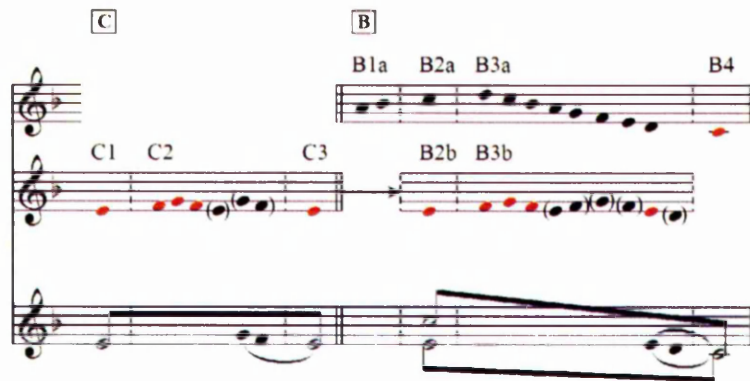
Both tunes use the same scale (*khamaj*) and have the same tonic (C). The pitch range in the *tripodī* is an octave, just a tone lower than that seen in the *poyar*. While it is significant to note that the overall contour in T7 is axial, in contrast to the series of melodic arch contours in P9 (in which the melodic line never drops below the tonic), if we break these two tunes down phrase by phrase we begin to see some interesting similarities between their individual contours. If the bracketed notes are left out of both schemas, A1-A3 of phrase A (T7) shows the same melodic arch contour as both C1-C3 and B2b-B3b of P9 (Figure 5.51). The downwards leap of a third from A3 to A4 of T7 is also evident in P9, from B3b to B4. Again, if the bracketed notes are omitted, phrase C of T7 shows the same arch contour as phrase C of P9. With its descending melodic arch contour, phrase B is paralleled in kind by phrase B'a' of P9 (although the contour of the latter is greater—a rise of four notes followed by a descent of nine, compared to the rise of one and descent of seven).

Figure 5.51: Comparison of Phrase A-C in *Halotun Nobi Tripodī* and *Halotun Nobi Poyar*: Abdul Korim

T7: Abdul Korim



P9: Abdul Korim



As the pitches and pitch spaces between the notes of the two schemas differ, it is not possible to compare them in greater detail at the melodic level. It is interesting to note the similar structural progression between the two schemas, however—*E, E, E, C* (P9), and *F, F, F, A*,<sup>56</sup> *C, C* (T7)—but there are no further similarities of note. While the contours between Abdul Korim's *Halotun Nobi poyar* and *tripodī* schemas show similarities at the phrasal level, they are more likely to be generic features of the genre rather than a reference to the same schema. What is clear, though, is that Abdul Korim uses the same *tripodī* schema in reading from *Halotun Nobi* and *Mohobbot Nama* as Montazil Ali does. But, on balance, there is greater evidence to point to its correlation with his *Mohobbot Nama*, rather than *Halotun Nobi, poyar*. If one can speak of 'tune attachment', Abdul Korim's *tripodī* schema seems to be 'attached' to *Mohobbot Nama*, whereas Montazil Ali's is not linked to either in any definite way.

<sup>56</sup> The descent to *A* (B3) in T7 which creates the axial contour is not seen in P9.

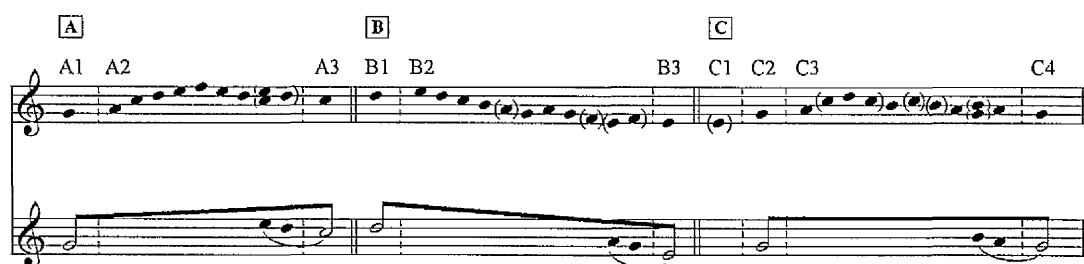
Unfortunately, as I do not have any recordings of Boshir Ahmed reading from *Mohobbot Nama*, an analysis of his *Halotun Nobi tripodī* schema will not be able to corroborate whether he uses the same tune for reading *tripodī boyans* in both *puthis*. However, because of the strong correlation between Abdul Lotif's and Abdul Korim's *tripodī* schemas in *Mohobbot Nama* (T3 and T4), I will compare these with Boshir Ahmed's and Montazil Ali's *Halotun Nobi tripodī* schemas (T8 and T6). I will also compare Boshir Ahmed's *Halotun Nobi tripodī* schema with his *poyar* schema (P8).

### Example T8: Boshir Ahmed's Tripodī (CD/T8)

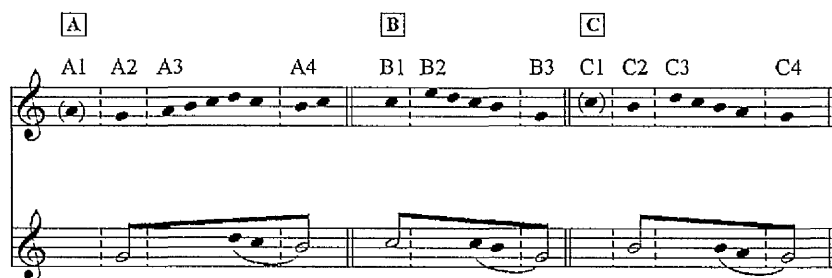
In many ways, Boshir Ahmed's *Halotun Nobi tripodī* schema resembles aspects of all of the other three *tripodī* schemas considered in regard to *Mohobbot Nama* and *Halotun Nobi* above (Figure 5.52). The tonic (*G*) is the same across all examples; the scale (*khamaj*) is the same in T6 and T4 (Abdul Lotif uses *kaphi* in T3). The pitch range, a minor ninth, is exactly the same in T3. Structurally, phrase A is most similar to phrase A of T6 whilst phrases B and C are most similar to phrases B and C of T3 and T4. We will consider each phrase in a little more detail below.

Figure 5.52: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobi Tripodī (Boshir Ahmed with Montazil Ali) and Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim)

T8: Boshir Ahmed



T6: Montazil Ali



T3: Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim

Phrase A in both T8 and T6 displays a rising melodic arch contour (Figure 5.53). The first structural category slot in both is the tonic and both rise to an apex before descending to the final structural category slot of the phrase, a pitch which is higher than the tonic on which the phrase began. While both examples exhibit this same generalised contour, their final structural category slots do not place emphasis on the same note: *B* is emphasised in T6; *C* in T8.<sup>57</sup> It is also interesting to observe that *C* is the final structural category slot in T3 and T4. The final five notes of A2 in T8 that lead to *C* (*F-E-D-E-D*) can also be seen in A2 of T3, as can the final four notes of A2 in T4 (*E-D-C-D*), with both examples taking a slightly different route to *C*. The descent to *A* in A4 of T3 and T4 is not a feature of phrase A in T8.

Phrase B displays a descending melodic arch contour, almost mirroring phrase A (Figure 5.54). Yet T8 is alone in having *D* as its first structural category slot. *C* is the first structural category slot of phrase B in T3, T4, and T6. Phrase B of T6 leaps from *C* to *E* (B1-B2) then descends to *B*, before again leaping downwards to *G* (B3), the final structural category slot of the phrase. This pattern of notes is seen in the first

<sup>57</sup> A4 of T6 does rise to *C* briefly, however, but this is in anticipation of the beginning of the next phrase. *B* is the note given emphasis through duration at the end of phrase A.

Figure 5.53: Comparison of Phrase A in Halotun Nobī Tripodī (Boshir Ahmed with Montazil Ali) and Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim)

T8: Boshir Ahmed

T6: Montazil Ali

T3: Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim



Figure 5.54: Comparison of Phrase B in Halotun Nobī Tripodī (Boshir Ahmed with Montazil Ali) and Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim)

T8: Boshir Ahmed

T6: Montazil Ali

T3: Abdul Lotif

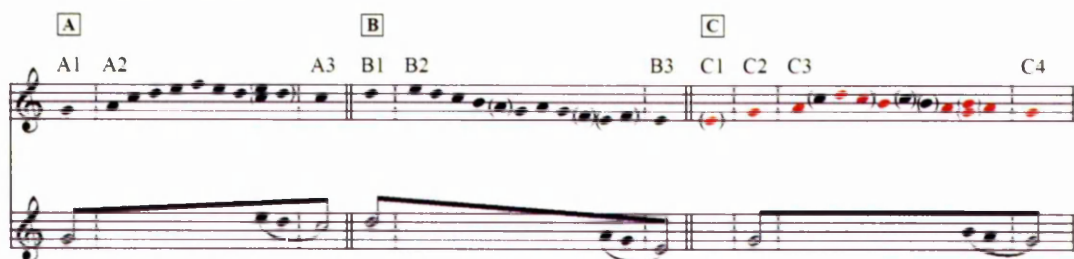
T4: Abdul Korim

half of B2 in T8, particularly if the first A (in brackets) is omitted. The pattern of notes in the second half of B2 in T8 (*A-G-F-E-F*) is paralleled in the final five notes of both T3 (B3) and T4 (B2), before ending on *E*, the final structural category slot of all three of the figures.

Phrase C, like the previous two phrases, appears to incorporate elements of all three of the other examples (Figure 5.55). Structurally, the progression from *G* to *G* (C2-C4) is seen in T3 and T4. C1-C2 shows the same occasional upwards leap from *E* to *G*, and the same pattern of notes as in C3 of T3 (*A-B-A*) and T4 (*A-B-A-G-A*). If we compare C3 in T6 and T8, we find the same descent in both (*D-C-B-A*). C4 of T6, like the final structural category slots of the other three figures, ends the phrase on *G*. Although phrase C of T6 displays a descending melodic arch contour (*B* to *G*, mirroring the contour of phrase A), in contrast to the simple melodic arch exhibited in phrase C of T3 and T4 (*G* to *G*), phrase C of T8, while beginning and ending on *G*, in rising to its apex (*D*) and descending to the tonic (*G*), resembles the descending melodic arch contour of phrase C of T6 perhaps more so than the simple melodic arch contour of the other two examples.

Figure 5.55: Comparison of Phrase C in Halotun Nobi Tripodī (Boshir Ahmed with Montazil Ali) and Mohobbot Nama Tripodī (Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim)

T8: Boshir Ahmed



T6: Montazil Ali



T3: Abdul Lotif

T4: Abdul Korim

A comparison of the melodic and poetic structures of Boshir Ahmed's *tripodī* from *Halotun Nobi* (Table 5.15) shows the same pattern in performance of pausing at the end of phrases B and C as Abdul Lotif's (Table 5.7) and Montazil Ali's (Table 5.9) do. Although phrase A is not separated from phrase B by a silent pause of significant duration, Boshir Ahmed, like Montazil Ali, does prolong the final note of phrase A (C), which helps to distinguish the two phrases from each other. In ending on C, the fourth degree of the scale, phrase A is left melodically open as is phrase B which ends on E, the sixth degree of the scale. Phrase C has a closed ending, finishing in every instance on the tonic which emphasises the main rhyme of the metre. This exact same pattern of open and closed endings is also seen in Tables 5.7 and 5.8.

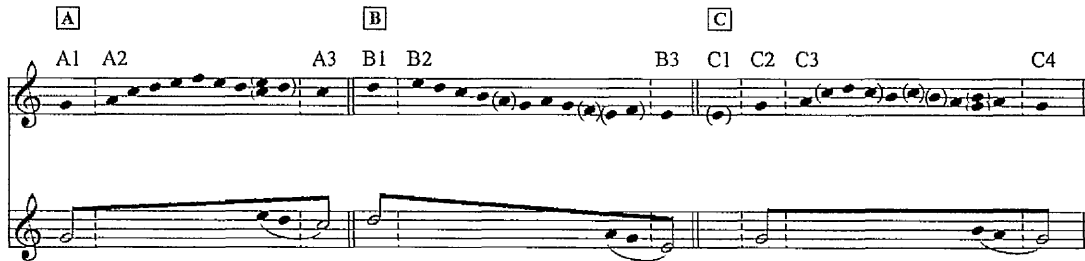
While there is a high degree of melodic correlation between *tripodī* schemas, this is not quite so apparent when we compare Boshir Ahmed's *tripodī* with his *poyar* (P8, Figure 5.56). Both employ the same scale type (*khamaj*), but they use different tonics, and, in the *poyar*, some chromatic alteration on the third and seventh degrees of the scale. The pitch range, like most of the other *tripodī* examples, is greater in his *poyar* by a tone.

Table 5.15: Comparison of melodic and poetic structures in Halotun Nobi Tripodī (Boshir Ahmed)

Text Line	Halotun Nobi Tripodī (p.134) Rhyme underlined (main rhyme in bold)	Poetic Structure	Melodic Structure	Final note
12	মশরীকে মগরীবে পন ° পান্ন জমীনে নন্নঃ Moshrike mogribe <u>por</u> ° pao jominer tolঃ	A/a, B/b	A B (pause)	C, E
13	মাতা দেখি ফলক উপর ॥ matha dekhi folker <u>upor</u> ॥	C/a	C (pause)	G
14	জন্ম উপরেতে জাহ ° নাজিব দেখিতে পাহঃ joto uporete <u>jai</u> ° tajjob dekhite <u>pai</u> ঃ	A/c, B/c	A B (pause)	C, E
15	মা জানী পী পাহাশু পৈন পন* na jani ki paimu er <u>por</u> *	C/a	C (pause)	G
16	পৈম জাংন তুমী ° বড়দরী ডরাই তুমীঃ emon dañgor <u>tumi</u> ° borohi dorai <u>ami</u> ঃ	A/d, B/d	A B (pause)	C, E
17	তবানপা উরী গেলো জান ॥ acanok uri gelo <u>jan</u> ॥	C/e	C (pause)	G
18	তরনী ফীরাইয়া গীতে ° তুমানে জাংন বুতেঃ aroni firishta <u>mile</u> ° tumare dañgor <u>bule</u> ঃ	A/f, B/f	A B (pause)	C, E
19	নদে পীবা তুমার শোমান* nohe kiba tumar shoman*	C/e	C (pause)	G

Figure 5.56: Comparison of Melodic Schemas for Halotun Nobi Tripodī and Halotun Nobi Poyar: Boshir Ahmed

T8: Boshir Ahmed



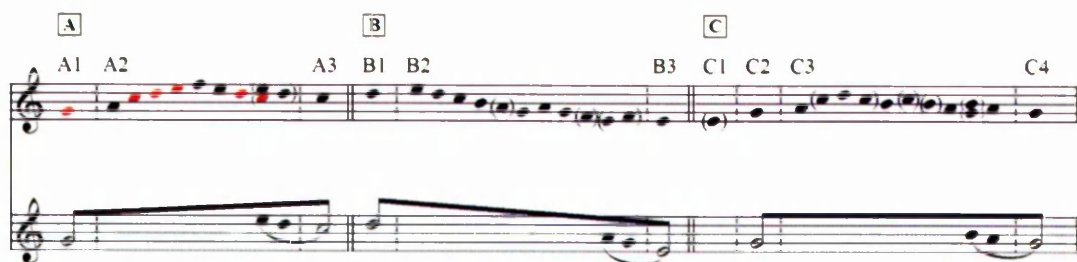
P8: Boshir Ahmed



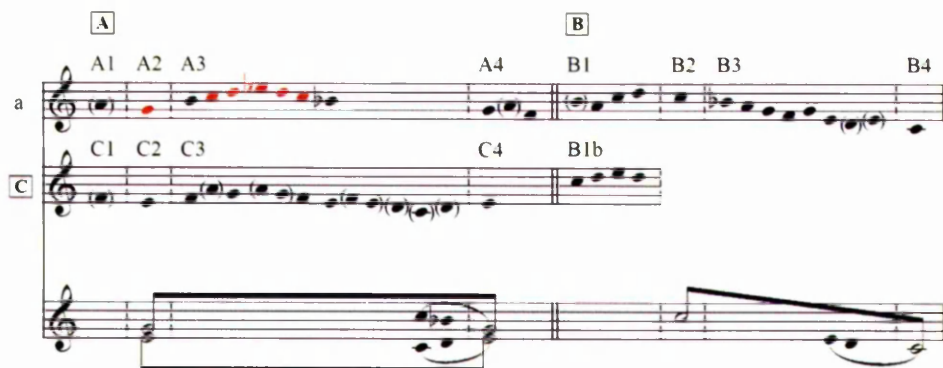
Beginning with phrase A (Figure 5.57), the first half of the arch contour in the *tripodī* is similar to phrase A of the *poṃar*—both start on *G* and rise to a similar apex (*F* in the *tripodī*, *Eb* in the *poṃar*). The melodic motion, however, is not the same. In phrase A of the *tripodī*, Boshir Ahmed moves from *G* to *A* before leaping to *C* and continuing in step-wise motion to *F*. In phrase A of the *poṃar*, the leap to *B* comes after *G* before continuing in step-wise motion to *Eb*. Further, as noted above, phrase A of the *tripodī* is an ascending melodic arch contour, the second half of the arch falls just four notes from *F* to *C* (in contrast to the interval of a seventh in its ascent from *G* to *F*). The *poṃar*, in contrast, is a more typical melodic arch in its descent from *Eb* back to *G* and finally to *F* (A4). While there are some general similarities, including some of the same notes (as highlighted), the melodic groupings are not the same.

Figure 5.57: Comparison of Phrase A in Halotun Nobī Tripodī and Halotun Nobī Poṃar: Boshir Ahmed

T8: Boshir Ahmed



P8: Boshir Ahmed



Phrase B of the *tripodī* shows some similarity to phrase B of the *poṃar* in its descending arch contour and octave descent (Figure 5.58). The pitch level, however, is different (*E-E* in the *tripodī*; *C-C* in the *poṃar*), and the first half of the contour in the *poṃar* has a greater intervallic difference than the *tripodī* (*A-D* in B1a, a fourth; *C-*



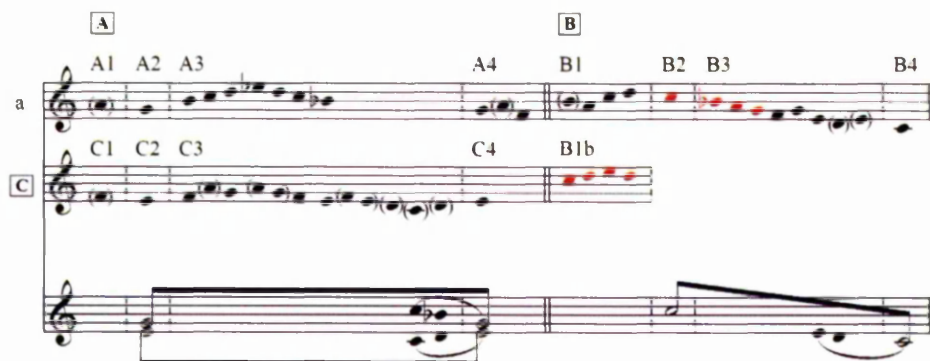
E in B1b, a third). There is a comparable melodic grouping, however, between B1b-B2-B3 of the *poyar* and A3-B1-B2 of the *tripodī* (C-D-E-D-C-Bb/B-A-G).

Figure 5.58: Comparison of Phrase B in Halotun Nobi Tripodī and Halotun Nobi Poyar: Boshir Ahmed

T8: Boshir Ahmed



P8: Boshir Ahmed

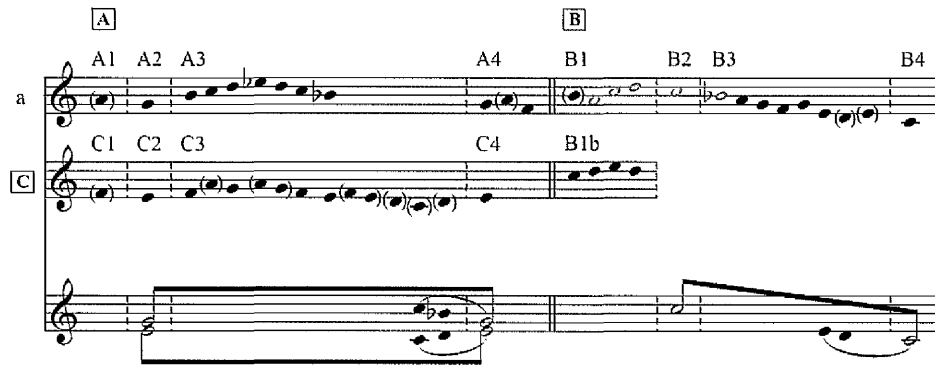


There is another similar melodic grouping between C3 of the *tripodī* and B1a-B2-B3 in the *poyar* (A-C-D-C-B/Bb, Figure 5.59).

Figure 5.59: Comparison of Phrase C in Halotun Nobi Tripodī and Halotun Nobi Poyar: Boshir Ahmed

T8: Boshir Ahmed





Apart from the general similarities of melodic contour, and the two groupings mentioned above, there are no other observable connections between Boshir Ahmed's *poyar* and *tripodī* schemas. The stronger connections were between the three *tripodī* schemas compared above. Yet when the three *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* schemas were considered, it was noted that Montazil Ali's schema (T5) did not show a high melodic correlation to either of Abdul Lotif's (T3) or Abdul Korim's (T4) schemas. As Boshir Ahmed's schema seems to share elements of all three, perhaps we can understand his schema as a link between them, which raises the possibility of there being a more generalised and abstracted schema in operation that incorporates all the tunes used to read *tripodī boyans* in *Mohobbot Nama* and *Halotun Nobī*, from which each reader has developed their own individualised schemas. It will require the analysis and comparison of many more examples, however, before it will be possible to attempt to create such a 'super-schema'. This is an area for future research.

In spite of their differences, there were enough similarities between the three *Halotun Nobī poyar* schemas considered above, particularly the use of phrase C, to understand how their constructed tunes could be perceived to be 'the same'. In corroboration of their readers' claims, this tune is, again, different to the other tunes used to read *poyar boyans* in the other two *puthis*. While none of these examples demonstrated the same asymmetrical juxtaposition of melodic and poetic structures seen in *Jongo Nama*, the use of phrase C—which is not a feature of the other *puthis' poyar* schemas—with its emphasis on the third degree of the scale, adds both additional melodic interest and, as exemplified in Boshir Ahmed's case particularly, a measure of melodic expectancy to maintain interest over the reading of hundreds of pages of *poyar boyans*. In Montazil

Ali's *pojar*, we see the largest pitch range yet—a major eleventh with all pitches used in his tune. Abdul Korim's is the smallest range, yet it still extends to a major ninth. The use of *bhairavi* and *khamaj* shows a consistency in the use of scales widespread throughout South Asia, including Bengal, and which were also used in the other two *puthis*.

For the single *tripodī boyan*, it is clear that Montazil Ali and Abdul Korim use the exact same schemas here in *Halotun Nobi* as they did to read the multiple *tripodī boyans* in *Mohobbot Nama*. I do not have examples to confirm whether this is also the case with Boshir Ahmed's schema, but his *tripodī* schema appears to incorporate elements of all three *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* schemas considered above. Therefore, while each of their schemas display certain distinctive features, these may well be the individualised expressions of a more generalised schema. More significant, though, is discovering that the same schema is used to read from two different *puthis*, for this contradicts the assertion that the tunes from one *puthi* cannot be used in the reading of another *puthi*, even if it is understandable in the case of *Halotun Nobi*. There is a link between these two *puthis*, however, which may provide the explanation: their author, Sadek Ali. The fact that both *puthis* were written by the same author indicates, at very least, that the schema used was not arbitrarily selected. In view of its dominant use in *Mohobbot Nama*, and the high degree of melodic correlation in Abdul Korim's *pojar* and *tripodī* schemas, it is most likely that the readers' 'borrowed' the *tripodī* schemas from *Mohobbot Nama* to read this single *Halotun Nobi boyan*.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

The stated aims of this chapter were to define what 'reading melodically' is etically, and to consider whether specific *puthis* are read with specific tunes by different *puthi*-readers, as claimed. To this end, we have considered seventeen examples—nine *pojar* tunes and eight *tripodī* tunes, from three narrative Sylheti-Nagri *puthis*, read by four different readers. In respect of the latter aim, we can say on the basis of the preceding analysis, that: (a), each reader uses a distinct tune in their reading of the *pojar boyans* in each of the *puthis* considered above; that (b), there is enough evidence to conclude that the *pojar* tunes used by each reader in reading specific *puthis* reference the same general schema and that each reader can, therefore, be said to be using the 'same tune'



for that *puthi*,<sup>58</sup> whilst (c), also acknowledging that each reader re-constructs the tune according to his (or her) own idiosyncratic version of the schema, which accounts for the differences that exist between them. I cannot say with certainty, though, that these *pojar* tunes are ‘non-transferable’ (not used to read *pojar boyans* in other *puthis*), but I did not hear them used in any other contexts during the course of my fieldwork.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from point (c) above (which must be true of individual oral performance generally), we see a contrast between the *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes in points (a) and (b). The *tripodī* schemas used in *Halotun Nobi*—by Montazil Ali and Abdul Korim—are the same schemas used in *Mohobbot Nama*, so in respect of (a), each reader cannot be said to be using a distinct tune to read *tripodī boyans* in each of the *puthis* considered above. This is also evidence that some of the tunes are, indeed, transferable (whatever the reasons for it). In respect of (b), although it is viable that a ‘super-schema’ exists for the *Mohobbot Nama-Halotun Nobi tripodī* that each reader uses to construct his own tune, the two *Jongo Nama tripodī* tunes did not show much melodic correlation, neither did Montazil Ali’s *Mohobbot Nama tripodī* tune to those read by Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim. It is therefore unlikely that they are all referencing the same general schema. For this reason, each reader cannot be said to be using the ‘same tune’ for each specific *puthi*. Furthermore, while Montazil Ali uses different schemas in constructing his *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, Abdul Lotif and Abdul Korim show the same propensity for adapting a single, more general, schema in the construction of both.

Of course, the analysis and comparison of many more examples from different readers throughout Sylhet Division are needed before firm conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, enough has been gleaned from these seventeen examples to answer the question that was posed in the introduction—what was Shah Alom *actually* asking Kamal to do when he instructed him to ‘read melodically’? Did he mean, ‘read *the* tune’ for *Halotun Nobi*, or ‘read *a* tune’? Although it is likely that Alom was making a fundamental distinction between ‘musical’ and ‘nonmusical’ reading, it is also likely

<sup>58</sup> This is stated with the possible exception of Montazil Ali’s *Jongo Nama pojar*. Even this schema, however, could be based on a more generalised one, for we noted the similarities between his schema and phrase B of Abdul Lotif’s and Abdul Korim’s schemas.

<sup>59</sup> It would be interesting to return to Sylhet and play these tunes to both *puthi*-readers and the general public to see whether they would be recognised (without the text) as being connected to these *puthis* alone, or to other sources.

that he had certain expectations of how Kamal would respond. Kamal, too, would also have to interpret what Alom was asking of him, one way or the other. As the example Kamal chose was a *poyar* from *Halotun Nobi*, it is probable that Alom did mean ‘the tune’ and that Kamal interpreted it as such.

Coming back to the first aim, the seventeen examples discussed above are also sufficient to attempt an etic definition of *puthi-pora* that challenges Goswami’s and Dunham’s views outlined in chapter 1. While Goswami acknowledges that *puthi-pora* is ‘traditionally [emically] known as “reading,”’ because he is aware of his (English-speaking) readership, he attempts to define what is meant in a way that will not leave his readers thinking that *puthi-pora* is just spoken verse. His choice of qualification—‘*a form of singing*’ (emphasis mine)—however, is unclear. How is ‘*a form of singing*’ distinct from ‘singing’? Goswami obviously feels the need to answer this question, for he goes on to explain in both the *New Grove* and *Garland*, what it is that the readers actually do when they perform the text: they ‘produce a kind of repetitive chanting’ or ‘[sing] the narrative by chanting’.

While ‘chanting’ may be an emically acceptable definition for *puthi-pora*, it is largely understood, in Western terms, to be musically limited. Indeed, this appears to be how Goswami uses the term: ‘Performers produce a kind of *repetitive* chanting of a *single melody* that consists of *only three or four notes* and *simple rhythms*’ (emphasis mine). Inasmuch as the melodic material of *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes largely conforms to their poetic metres (emphasising the primacy of the text), and is repeated every one or two couplets, *puthi-pora* is repetitive (*tripodī* more than *poyar*, interestingly, even though it uses three, rather than two, melodic phrases, because of their general lack of internal phrasal variation). But so is every song that uses a repeated verse-structure—narrative or lyrical. Admittedly, none of the examples above are read using a refrain, and this, together with the length of some *boyans*, or the combined length of multiple *boyans* using the same metre (the *poyar boyans* in *Halotun Nobi* and *Jongo Nama*, in particular), means that the same melodic material is repeated more often than it would be in other, shorter, songs. This, however, is not the crux of Goswami’s argument. It is, rather, the type of melody that is repeated—‘*a single melody...of only three or four notes* and *simple rhythms*’—that causes him to be reluctant to state that *puthi-pora* is actually ‘singing’, and to define it as ‘chanting’ instead. Although each metre in each *puthi* does use ‘*a single melody*’ throughout (and although some of the readers use the

same schema in constructing both *poṃar* and *tripodī* tunes), every single example that has been considered in this chapter has proved Goswami's analysis—'of only three or four notes'—wrong. The smallest number of notes used in a single tune is six, with an average that is much higher.<sup>60</sup> In *Halotun Nobī*, we see both the largest pitch range (a major eleventh) and rhythms which use syncopation and triplets.

A range of musical ability exists among *puṭhi*-readers of course. Some readers may well construct tunes which are melodically limited, but such examples should not be used to define a whole tradition. This is essentially where Dunham's argument falls down. Her association of 'casual' *jarīgan* performance with *puṭhi-poṛa*, 'depending on the excellence of the performer', implies that good singers will perform *jarīgan* in a way that resembles 'song' more than 'reading' (that is, in a 'fundamentally musical' way) and not-so-good singers will perform *jarīgan* in a way that resembles 'reading' more than 'song' (that is, in a 'less musically orientated' way). But if the 'excellence of the performer' can determine the level of 'musicality' in a *jarīgan* performance, the same can surely be true of *puṭhi-poṛa*. In fact, Dunham's whole basis in using *puṭhi-poṛa* as a platform from which to elevate *jarīgan*'s musical status is flawed.<sup>61</sup> There is nothing to distinguish the melodic features of *jarīgan*, as she presents them in chapter 9 of her book, from those seen in the *puṭhi-poṛa* examples analysed in this chapter. As it happens, Dunham (1997:138) states that the 'pitch range of *jarigan* songs is generally within an octave, usually remaining within a range of six notes.' The widest pitch range she has encountered, in all of her examples, is a major ninth.

The point here is that Dunham cannot discriminate between *jarigan* and *puṭhi-poṛa* on melodic grounds, for the examples above show otherwise. If not on melodic grounds, then on what other bases can Dunham state that *puṭhi-poṛa* is 'less musically orientated' than *jarigan* (in her bid to prove that *jarigan* is 'song' and not 'reading')? She appeals primarily to 'the freedom of the *jarigan* singer...to improvise and to alter the standard verse structure of [the] poetry to fit a particular tune.' This she contrasts with '*paṭh* recitals', in which readers merely 'articulate a traditional verse form.' But, while there is no denying that *jarīgan* singers have greater opportunities for individual

<sup>60</sup> Between the four readers, there is an average pitch range in the *poṃar* tunes of an octave in *Jongo Nama*, a ninth in *Mohobbot Nama*, and a tenth in *Halotun Nobī*.

<sup>61</sup> I am not seeking to question Dunham's analysis of *jarīgan*. What I am questioning, however, are her unwarranted statements about *puṭhi-poṛa* that convey it in a musically inferior light.

creativity than *puthi*-readers do in their ‘freedom’ to interact with the text, this is not a basis for musical differentiation. Admittedly, causing the poetic structure of the text to be altered in order to accommodate a particular tune does give the tune primacy, but, by Dunham’s (1997:173) own admission, this style of composition, the ‘expository-lyrical’ style,<sup>62</sup> is only ‘exceptionally used in *jarigan* singing’.

The most common of the four *jarigan* compositional styles Dunham describes, is the ‘fully expository’ style,<sup>63</sup> a style which best matches *puthi-pora* (apart from the inclusion of a refrain and the accompaniment of musical instruments). Dunham (1997: 172) acknowledges that it is a ‘repetitious style of composition’ but she nevertheless argues that ‘the relatively simple tunes of *jarigan* songs’ in this style ‘do not adhere to their texts so tightly that they become monotonous.’ These tunes, she continues:

...generally include enough melodic ornamentation and variation to keep audiences musically as well as verbally enthralled. The musical rendition of *jarigan* texts, even in this basic style of song composition, places them in a category distinctly more musical than the *path* (“reading” recital) genre of narrative poetry.

Dunham returns here to her faulty premise: that *jarigan* tunes exhibit musical features not found in *puthi-pora*. The one specific ornamentation she mentions, ‘the prolonged syllable’ (prolonging a syllable on a single tone), was noted in several of the examples above.<sup>64</sup> As for variation, apart from the single melodic phrase Montazil Ali employs in his *Jongo Nama poyar*, every other *poyar* tune<sup>65</sup> analysed in this chapter indicates the use of at least two melodic phrases with internal variation present in at least one of them. There is even melodic variation in Montazil Ali’s single phrase.

If by ‘musical rendition’ Dunham means ‘the alternation of narrative verse and refrain, and the accompaniment of musical instruments’, then *puthi-pora* must be put in a ‘less musical’ category. But both of these features are not characteristic of *jarigan* in its ‘purist form’. This is the distinction of ‘solo performances in informal settings...

<sup>62</sup> This compositional ‘style’ indicates the combination of an ‘expository’ text with a ‘lyrical’ tune. ‘In this style,’ Dunham (1997:173) writes, ‘the text is based on a typical *jarigan* story rendered in *payar* couplet-verses, but the tune has its own structure which is at moments out of phase with the textual syntax and even out of phase with the textual couplet-verse structure.’

<sup>63</sup> ‘The “fully expository” style is characterized by a text that tells a story,’ says Dunham (1997:170), which ‘expos[es] the facts with minimal elaboration, as in typical *jarigan* song texts. The tune is also “expository” in style; that is, it exposes the words of the text and is, therefore, word-oriented. The “melodic sentences” are mostly in the syllabic style and they are in synchronous concurrence with the two lines of each text couplet-verse.’

<sup>64</sup> The other ‘embellishments and vocalizations’ referred to in Dunham’s (1997:148-56) chapter on the melodic features of *jarigan* are also present in the examples considered in this chapter.

<sup>65</sup> I am only referring to *poyar* tunes here because Dunham (1997:127) says that *tripodī* is not used ‘for long narrative songs’, but is generally reserved ‘for purely lyrical songs’.

without the interpolations by the *dohars* [the ‘refrainers’]’ (Dunham 1997:64), which, presumably, excludes instrumental accompaniment too. This typical ‘fully expository’ style, despite being repetitive and ‘word-oriented’, is defined by Dunham as ‘song’ on the basis of the melodic features of its narrative tune. Because these melodic features are *not* distinct from those seen in the examples above, do we conclude, therefore, that the performance of *jarīgan* compositions in this style is actually ‘reading’ rather than ‘singing’? On the contrary! It provides grounds for *puthi-poṛa* to be defined, etically, as ‘singing’ (rather than ‘chanting’), and for the narrative *puthis* to be described, on a par with *jarīgan* texts, as ‘epic songs’.

So where does this leave us? If *puthi-poṛa* is classified, emically, as ‘reading’, but can be defined, etically, as ‘singing’, what appellation can we afford the tradition that respects both perspectives? Here, we come back to the words Alom chooses to instruct Kamal to read the *puthi*-text—‘*sur kori poṛen*’, ‘read melodically’. I suggest that *puthi-poṛa* can accurately be defined as ‘melodic reading’, the term used in the title of this thesis. ‘Reading’ retains the literal translation of ‘*poṛa*’ in deference to the emic view, and the descriptor ‘melodic’ indicates the kind of reading that is meant: reading *with a tune*. This frees *puthi-poṛa* from the etic connotations of ‘chant’, yet allows for the less-adept reader’s ‘reading’ to be included alongside that of the more-adept reader in being described, equally, as ‘melodic’. For whether a reader is musically more or less adept, all readers, when asked to do so, will read their *puthis* with a tune of some description. Etically, some will sound more ‘chant-like’; others will sound more like ‘singing’.

Although the focus of this chapter has been music-analytical, the analysis still has a bearing on the thesis hypothesis: that *puthi-poṛa* (‘melodic reading’) was used in the Islamisation of Bengal. At the most basic level, the use of scales which are part of Bengali musical culture (and South Asian musical culture more widely), indicates that *puthi-poṛa* belongs to this musical culture. While this may have been assumed, it nonetheless proves the assumption definitively. This is significant; for it shows that even the reformers (like Sadek Ali), who Islamised the language, symbolism, and, in particular, the content of the ‘new Islamic *puthis*’ (like *Mohobbot Nama* and *Halotun Nobī*), nevertheless used the same pre-Islamic poetic and musical forms as the cultural mediators did. Whether or not the ‘same tunes’ were adopted directly from the Hindu Bengali narrative traditions such as *mongol-kabýo* or adapted to match

specific *puthi*-texts, is a question with an answer that is lost to history. Having said that, it would be fascinating to compare Muslim examples of *puthi-pora* (like those analysed above), with examples from their contemporaneous Hindu counterparts in order to see to what extent they are melodically similar. The schema format, used to analyse the *poṇar* and *tripodī* tunes in this chapter, would be eminently suitable for this kind of comparison. This will be an interesting project for the future.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to achieve two main aims. The first was to present an ethnographic account of *puthi-pora* as observed in present-day Sylhet, Bangladesh, both for its own sake, and to provide a foundation for engaging with the second: to test my hypothesis that *puthi-pora* was used as a vehicle for Islamisation in Bengal. This I have sought to do by considering—in the details of the ethnography—what it *is* about *puthi-pora* that *would* have made the tradition so powerful a vehicle for Islamisation, and, therefore, what would have made it appeal to the cultural mediators and reformers as a means of communicating their messages. In order to realise these aims, I developed methods of analysis founded on schema theory which have governed much of my approach in this thesis. Here, I will briefly summarise how both aims, and the methods used to achieve them, have been pursued throughout. The implications of these aims and methods will be considered, as will suggestions for potential avenues of future research.

### *The Ethnographic Aim: Summary and Implications*

The need for a holistic study of *puthi-pora* was precipitated, in part, by the discovery that only a few brief and largely unrepresentative extracts of the tradition existed in other works. While I do not claim that this thesis is holistic, it has gone some way to fill the ‘gap’ by presenting a more complete and representative account of *puthi-pora* than had existed before, particularly in respect of performance context and musical status. This was attempted in three ways: first, by including the fieldnotes of a single *puthi-pora* event by two observers—mine as a total cultural outsider, and those of my research assistant who is of Bengali descent—in chapter 2 (these accounts are specific ethnographic descriptions in their own right); second, by comparing the details of this event with the details of other, similarly documented, events, interview data, and other sources in chapters 3 and 4 (which took the ethnography beyond the specifics of one

event, to a more generalised depiction); and third, by analysing and comparing *poṃar* and *tripodī* tunes from different *puṭhis*, read by various *puṭhi*-readers in chapter 5 (which helped to clarify the tradition's musical status etically).

Having critiqued Goswami's definitions and Dunham's descriptions of *puṭhi-poṃa* throughout this thesis (and shown them to be wanting in certain key respects), I offer what I believe to be a more accurate and *schematic* definition of the tradition, as well as a *prototypical* description based on my specific experience. The definition is an attempt to reduce *puṭhi-poṃa* to its most essential elements; the description is a summary of the details relating to and affecting a whole *puṭhi-poṃa* event in Muslim Sylhet. First, in constructing my definition of *puṭhi-poṃa*, I will return to some of the issues raised in chapter 1, both by way of review, and to explain the inclusion of each part. This will be followed, separately, by my description.

Goswami's definitions of *puṭhi-poṃa* in *Garland* and *New Grove* raised issues regarding the tradition's literary genre, its performance practice, its use of melody, its function and its performance context. As discussed in chapter 4, although the Muslim-authored, Sylheti-Nagri *puṭhi* corpus includes a diversity of genres and compositional forms, the *puṭhi-poṃa* repertoire does not include all *puṭhi*-types without exception. It is the narrative-based *puṭhis*, like *Jongo Nama*, *Halotun Nobī*, and *Mohobbot Nama* that constitute its repertoire. Goswami was not wrong, then, to describe *puṭhi-poṃa* as 'ballad recitation' or 'a type of folk-ballad rendition', but the term ballad has specific associations with certain European traditions which may or may not parallel *puṭhi-poṃa*. To avoid any potential misrepresentation, it is better to define *puṭhi-poṃa*, more generically, as 'the reading of *poetic-narrative texts*'.

This definition in itself, however, is not sufficient. Though it indicates the type of literary genre that constitutes the *puṭhi-poṃa* repertoire, it says nothing of the nature of performance. As chapter 5 has demonstrated, this 'reading' is melodic—that is, it is reading 'with tunes'. Contrary to Goswami's claims, these tunes are not 'single' tunes constructed from 'only three or four notes'. Each of the seventeen tunes considered in chapter 5 showed this analysis of *puṭhi*-melody to be wrong. The reading of any *puṭhi* may use any number of tunes (their number dependant on the number of poetic metres used in its composition), and, if there are any musical limitations, these are due, not to the nature of the tradition, but to the musical ability of the individual *puṭhi*-reader. We can say on the basis of etic analysis, then, that *puṭhi-poṃa* is not 'a form of singing' or



‘a kind of repetitive chanting’, *it is* ‘singing’. But, while it may be accurate to describe *puthi-pora* as ‘the singing of narrative poetry’ from an etic perspective, this loses the emic distinction that exists between *gan* (song) and *pora* (reading). And, even though ‘chanting’ may be an acceptable English translation of *pora* in a performance context, this word, like ‘ballad’, has associations in Western musical tradition which are not all helpful. As I argued in chapter 5, it may be more correct to describe what the *puthi*-readers are *actually* doing (their performance practice), as ‘melodic reading’. We can, therefore, define *puthi-pora* as ‘the *melodic reading* of poetic-narrative texts’.

As a pithy definition of *puthi-pora*, this could suffice. Yet it tells us nothing of what the tradition is used for, and where. Goswami’s extract in the *Garland* addressed both, writing that *puthi-pora* is ‘a very popular musical exercise in rural Bengal’. This portrayal of the tradition’s function is particularly unhelpful. In chapter 3, we saw that while *puthi-pora* events may be arranged for any number of reasons, and even though individuals may attend with varying motivations, the primary motivation of the *puthi*-readers to read aloud is based on a belief that there is something in a *puthi*-text that is worth communicating and which needs to be understood. If this is taken into account, *puthi-pora* could be defined as ‘a tradition of melodic reading, *used to communicate and facilitate the understanding of* poetic-narrative texts’. This definition is still not complete, however, and needs to be refined further.

In terms of where *puthi-pora* takes place, Goswami was right in saying that it is ‘very popular...in rural Bengal’, as the rural location for performance was shown in chapter 3 to be most typical. It is also true that *puthi-pora* can take place in an urban setting (even if it is not as typical), so a definition of the tradition must not preclude this possibility. In addition, since 1947, it is no longer accurate to refer to ‘Bengal’ as a geographic entity.<sup>1</sup> This area is known today as Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Including both in a definition of *puthi-pora* would be cumbersome (not to mention that my fieldwork was conducted only in Bangladesh so I cannot comment on the situation in West Bengal). It would also overlook the fact that the tradition also takes place in certain parts of Assam. In order to capture only the essential features of the tradition, then, it is best to exclude specific locations (however typical they are), and to define *puthi-pora*, instead, as ‘a *Bengali* tradition of melodic reading...’ where

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<sup>1</sup> I use ‘Bengal’ in my thesis title, but it is in the context of historical Islamisation.

‘Bengali’ refers to the overall cultural-group rather than to a general geographic area or to the Bengali language specifically. Sylheti-Nagri *puthi-pora* finds its place within this definition as a regional expression of a wider Bengali tradition.

As we move from Goswami’s brief definitions of *puthi-pora* to Dunham’s, it is important to remember that Dunham does not present a definition of the tradition as such. She references *puthi-pora* in two specific contexts—considering it as a possible antecedent of *jarigan*, and to distinguish *jarigan* from *puthi-pora* in terms of ‘musical excellence’. The latter context was discussed, and its premise refuted, in chapter 5. As the conclusion was, essentially, that ‘musical excellence’ depends on the ability of the performer (rather than being an intrinsic feature of either tradition), and that, etically, *puthi-pora* is no less *gan* than *jarigan*, this does not alter the definition of *puthi-pora* that has been developed so far. It is, therefore, unnecessary to repeat these arguments again. We will focus, instead, on just two other issues she raises, those which relate to the *puthi*-texts and their contents.<sup>2</sup>

Dunham makes an obvious yet significant statement when she says that *puthi-pora* is reading from ‘actual written material’. As we saw in chapters 3 and 4, the *puthi* is the only indispensable object in performance; *puthi-pora* can take place anywhere as long as there is a *puthi* and a *puthi*-reader. Although the words ‘poetic-narrative texts’ may suggest to a Western reader that these are ‘written’ texts, it is possible, in the context of South Asian tradition, that they may, in fact, be ‘oral’. After all, Dunham differentiates between *puthi-pora* and *jarigan* on these grounds—stating that *jarigan* poetry was ‘never intended to be written down’, and that *jarigan* texts are performed and ‘transmitted orally’. This is in contrast to *puthi*-texts which are written and contained in book or manuscript form, read from in performance, and transmitted as physical objects. Any definition of *puthi-pora* should make this clear. It would be possible to add the word ‘written’ to ‘poetic-narrative texts’, but this could imply that *puthis* are ‘poetic-narrative texts’, whereas they are also compilations of lyrical songs and eclectic genres, as seen in chapter 4. It would be better to use the literal definition of the term *puthi* as a qualifier, and adding ‘in manuscript or book form’ to ‘poetic-narrative texts’: ‘poetic-narrative texts *in manuscript or book form*’.

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<sup>2</sup> Dunham discusses two additional issues which relate to the *puthi*-readers and their literacy, but these are too specific to warrant inclusion in an essential definition of the tradition.

Regarding the ‘content’ of the *puthi*-texts, Dunham is both specific and broad. Her point of departure is undoubtedly Hindu, writing that the ‘actual written material’ used in *puthi-pora* is ‘generally from the *puranas*’, which ‘include an indefinite stock of tales from the great Hindu epics...and from lesser ones’. She also states that ‘Each sect or cult has its own stock of *punthi* literature,’ including Buddhists and Muslims. I cannot comment on Buddhist tradition, but this thesis is evidence that there is a strong Islamic tradition of *puthi-pora*, at least in Sylhet. Yet the hypothesis hangs on the fact that this Islamic tradition is the outworking of the historical processes of Islamisation, in which the cultural mediators adopted and adapted a pre-existing, pre-Islamic Hindu tradition. Therefore, even if the word ‘*puthi*’ has developed specific associations with Muslim Bengali literature since the nineteenth century (as mentioned in chapter 1), it was associated with Hindu literature before that time, and it remains in use by Hindus today.<sup>3</sup> And, in spite of the formative influence of the Hindu tradition on the Muslim tradition, the latter is now independently established. Historical associations aside, the fact that contemporary Bengali dictionaries only define ‘*puthi*’ in general terms may indicate that its content cannot be assumed and needs to be specified.

Dunham was right, then, to acknowledge that ‘the [*puthi*] texts vary according to the religions and their sects’ and that their content depends ‘on the affiliation of the reader’. Secular *puthis* do exist,<sup>4</sup> and the lexical definition does not exclude them, but the historical content and contemporary context are overwhelmingly religious. Unless this is proved otherwise, the religious nature of the tradition should be included in its definition. This can be achieved by adding ‘devotional’ to ‘poetic-narrative texts’. As the historical connection between the Hindu and Muslim expressions of the tradition is so strong, however, both warrant inclusion. The content of the *puthi-pora* repertoire could thus be defined: ‘*devotional* poetic-narrative texts in manuscript or book form, *particularly Hindu or Muslim*’.

It would be difficult to add anything more to a concise and essential definition of *puthi-pora* without running the risk of it being over-specific and, consequently, inapplicable to either the Muslim or Hindu context in some respect. I suggest, therefore, a definition as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a copy of *Podmo-Puran* I bought recently has the alternative title ‘*Monosa Pūthi*’.

<sup>4</sup> In his paper on *genres*, Lloyd-Williams (2001) refers to a Sylheti-Nagri *puthi* entitled ‘Poems of the European Great War’, a collection of songs on World War II written by Shekh Abdul Wahid (c.1950).

*Puthi-pora*, a Bengali tradition of melodic reading, used to communicate and facilitate the understanding of devotional poetic-narrative texts in manuscript or book form, particularly Hindu or Muslim.

This definition, I believe, captures the essence of the tradition—it specifies only what cannot be excluded. Inasmuch as the majority of ‘objects and relations [are] yet to be filled in with concrete detail’ (D’Andrade 1995:124), it is *schematic*. As unlikely as it would be, if Abdul Lotif were to read *Halotun Nobī* to a group of workers at an office party in London, on the tenth floor of a modern tower-block, surrounded by desks and computers, it would be no less *puthi-pora* than it would be if he were reading to family members and neighbours in his *barī* in Doloipara, Horipur Bajar; indeed, it would be no less *puthi-pora* for Biplob’s aunt, Anima Das, to read *Podmo-Puraṇ*, by herself, in front of the house idols in Sylhet Town, in worship to the goddess *Monosa*.

As is evident throughout the pages of this thesis, however, even though *puthi-pora* may occur in any number of contexts and yet still *be puthi-pora*, I have focused in particular on the performance of the Sylheti-Nagri *puthis* of Muslim-authorship. Of the *puthi-pora* events I observed in Muslim Sylhet, many of the specific elements that constitute the schema were similar. On the basis of these repeated similar experiences, I can, therefore, generate a *prototypical* description of the tradition that ‘consists of a specified set of expectations’—my own—‘filling in...the slots of the schema with an individual’s standard default values’ (D’Andrade 1995:124). What is described below should be understood in these terms: ‘a highly typical *instantiation*’ of *my* experience of *puthi-pora* in the context of Muslim Sylhet:

In Muslim Sylhet, *puthi-pora* typically takes place in rural villages, in *baris*. Performance events are either public or private; that is, initiation of an event either comes from outside or within a *puthi*-reader’s immediate family. If it is a public event, some degree of organisation is necessary to decide what *puthi* will be read, where, and when. Patronage is also required to cover expenses, which usually includes tea, something to eat, and some kind of remuneration for the *puthi*-reader. Private events are more spontaneous.

Although *puthi-pora* can take place at any time, the agricultural seasons and Islamic calendar can affect the frequency of performances. Events occur most often between the Bengali months of *Āsin* and *Kartik* (mid-September to mid-November) and between *Pouṣ* and *Phalgun* (mid-December to mid-March), times largely free of cultivation. In addition, the Islamic months of *Mōhorrom* and *Rojob* are times when *Jongo Nama* and *Halotun Nobī* are particularly read. During *Ramadan* there is little time for *puthi-pora*, as it is taken up with specific observances and Qur'anic readings (*khotom pora*).

*Puthi*-readers are non-professionals, both male and female. Men do not attend events in which a woman is reading (which by nature are private), but women are often present at events where men are reading. These are generally family members (or neighbours) of the person hosting the event, but, rather than join an otherwise male audience in the room where the reading is taking place, the women listen from another separate and private space. Apart from this gender segregation, there are no special seating arrangements. Audience members sit around the *puthi*-reader who sits on a mat on the floor. Attendance varies, but numbers range between 20 and 40, and consist of all ages. Having more than one *puthi*-reader read at an event is typical, but not necessary.

Audience members may attend events for a variety of reasons (including entertainment and learning), but *puthi*-readers read because they believe that the *puthi*-texts are worth communicating and need to be understood. It is not unusual, therefore, for a *puthi*-reader to interrupt his or her reading to explain a portion of the *puthi*-text; nor is it uncommon for one *puthi*-reader to correct another if he or she misreads it. How a *puthi* is read also matters, for keeping the audience engaged is crucial to their benefiting from the reading. A *puthi*-reader may use a combination of musical and non-musical devices to achieve this, including facilitating audience involvement by prompting them to join in at the end of the rhymed poetic lines.

*Puthi-pora* events usually take place at night, after *Eśa* prayers, and may go on until the early hours of the morning. There is no set pattern, however, no specific sequence of events or repertory obligations. Generally, *puthi-pora* events consist of the reading of one *puthi*, or a particular section from

it, and sometimes, depending on the desires of the audience or those involved in organising them, other *puthi* sections or songs. If desired, specific *puthis* are read over a number of consecutive nights until completed.

Despite much of their content coming from the Qur'an or Hadith, *puthis* are not considered to be sacred objects. Their value lies in their intelligible content; content composed in the Sylheti or Bengali language, and written in the Sylhet-Nagri or Bengali scripts. There are two main *puthi* types: epic narratives and lyrical song collections. The *puthi-pora* repertoire consists of the first, *puthis* which are primarily composed in *pojar* and *tripodī* metres, and are read melodically using specific tunes.

This prototypical description of *puthi-pora* and the schematic definition above are both based upon my individual experiences of the tradition. I readily acknowledge the limitations of my perspective and the contingent nature of the data that has shaped my knowledge and understanding of the tradition. However, inasmuch as the primary aim of the thesis was to document and describe *puthi-pora* as it is performed today in Sylhet—in order that the misrepresentations evident in the existing literature might be addressed, and that an emically-derived, etically-sustainable definition and description of the tradition that would take into account its performance context, content, and use of melody, might be produced—this aim has been met.

Much more research needs to be done (indeed, should be done) in Sylhet and further afield, however, in Muslim and Hindu, and in other potential religio-linguistic contexts, in order to further our knowledge and understanding of *puthi-pora* as a text-based, but musically-oral, performance tradition. This will require greater exposure to *puthi-pora* in general terms, as well as focusing on some of the more specific issues that were raised throughout this thesis, such as studying the female context, analysing interactions between performers and audience, understanding the connection between a performer's use of musical and non-musical performance techniques and the *puthi*-texts being read (which will also involve a textual analysis), and comparing the tunes used by Muslim and Hindu readers.

### *The Historical Aim: Summary and Implications*

In a 'position statement' on historical ethnomusicology, presented at the 2006 Society for Ethnomusicology Conference, Richard Widdess (2006:10) asked: 'Can we...think of a musical performance as in some sense a historical document? Is the performance witness to continuing historical processes, can we hear history in the musical sounds?' The answer provided by this thesis is a resounding 'yes'! As Widdess (1986:1) notes elsewhere, 'the synchronic perspective is an illusion.' He continues:

Every musical tradition is subject to continuing processes of transmission, change, and re-generation, representing in many cases the extension of historical processes that have given the tradition its present shape. Any understanding of the present that ignores its interaction with the past will be seriously incomplete.

*Puthi-pora* is one such case. If the ethnography of the Islamic tradition had been presented in this thesis without interacting with the history of Islamisation in Bengal, it would have been left 'seriously incomplete'. We would be left with the description of the tradition above, but with no understanding of where it came from, or of the historical processes that have given it its shape. In terms of the historical question, too, had *puthi-pora* not been considered in relation to its historical context, our understanding of the 'precise way in which [Islam] spread in Bengal' and the 'mechanics' of the processes involved would have remained, in this particular respect, 'shrouded in...mystery' (Abecassis 1990:9).

The hypothesis of this thesis is that *puthi-pora* was used in the Islamisation of Bengal. This shaped the secondary aim, which was to test this hypothesis by asking questions of the ethnography: What *is* it about *puthi-pora* that *would* have made it so powerful a vehicle for Islamisation? Here, I will briefly summarise what was already known about Islamisation in Bengal and the Muslim Bengali literature, how this study has contributed to this topic, and, in attempting to answer the historical question, what implications my approach may have for ethnomusicology more widely.

Chapter 1 showed there to be two key phases in the history of Islamisation in Bengal. The first phase, from the thirteenth through eighteenth centuries, was gradual and acculturated. The second phase, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, was abrupt and counter-cultural. Pivotal in both of these phases, was Muslim Bengali *puthi*-literature: literature composed from the sixteenth century by men who sought to 'illumine the masses of Bengali Muslims,' those 'found ill-grounded in their religious tradition and steeped in pre-existing non-Muslim tradition' (Roy 1983:58). In seeking

to communicate Islam to the masses (as they understood it), these men—who acted as ‘cultural mediators for [the] Bengali Muslims’ (Roy 1983:8)—adopted, not only the language of ‘pre-existing non-Muslim tradition’, but its idioms, symbols, and literary forms, too. In short, they presented an Islamic message using a pre-Islamic vehicle, and, thus, ‘became the architects of a rich Islamic syncretistic tradition’ (Roy 2001: 189)—‘a distinct tradition...with its roots firmly extended into the cultural milieu of Bengal’ (Roy 1996:103). It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the reform movements swept across the Islamic world and into Bengal that this syncretistic tradition, and the culture and values which sustained it, was seriously challenged. Ironically, the reformers, who sought to purge Bengali Muslim society of its un-Islamic beliefs and practices (as they understood them to be), used the same vehicle to communicate their message—the syncretistic adaptation of a ‘pre-existing non-Muslim tradition’, altered in language, idiom, and (of course) content, but not in form.

It is clear that this Muslim Bengali literature has had a vital impact on Bengali Islam, and understanding its use goes a long way in addressing the *how* of the process of Islamisation—*how* Islamic ideals seeped into local culture and were acculturated in its first phase, and *how* the reformers mounted their attack on the syncretistic tradition that resulted in the second. But it does not go far enough. The sources dealing with the issues stop short at describing how the largely illiterate, Bengali Muslim masses were supposed to access the literature of either phase. That it was through public ‘readings’ is implied but not explored. It seemed to me that this point needed to be made explicit. By connecting *puthi-pora* with the performance of the Muslim Bengali literature, and, thereby, hypothesising that *puthi-pora* was a precise way in which Islamisation took place in Bengal, not only could the ‘historical processes that have given the tradition its present shape’ be identified, but its ‘musical performance’ could be viewed ‘as...a historical document’, and studied as an ‘extension of [those] ...processes’. I sought to test my hypothesis on the basis that, if I was correct, *puthi-pora*, in its contemporary Islamic context, would bear some relation to its pre-existing non-Muslim past. I also wanted to discover what it *is* about *puthi-pora* that would have made it so powerful a vehicle for communicating Islam.

This was attempted, particularly, in chapter 3. Here, the details of performance context were compared with parallel Hindu traditions of book and manuscript reading.



We saw that although the desire of the cultural mediators was 'to wean Muslims away from *mangal*-literature by creating for them in Bengali an Islamic [literary] substitute' (Roy 1983:88), the content of the literature was, largely, where this substitution began and ended; the cultural mediators did not create a new context for its communication. This is most significant, for, had they done so, Islamisation might not have had the kind of impact that it has. Their contextual approach is typified in regard to location. While the mosques and shrines were the bases from which Islam historically spread, the new converts did not have to attend these institutions to learn about their professed religion (although they may well have done so). As evidenced by the contemporary context for *puthi-pora*, it appears that Islamic instruction came to *them*, into their homes, through this substitute literature and its performance. This was crucial, for, at that time, Hindu traditions were being propagated in every house with the Muslim converts in ready attendance. By providing alternative material for the Bengali Muslim masses to read in the home, the cultural mediators were able to meet their spiritual need for Islamic instruction, without requiring them to abandon their social need for community—the context in which they familiarly learned.

In addition to its ordinary location, we saw that *puthi-pora* is characterised by ordinariness in almost every other respect too. Performance events are not organised to fulfil a ritual purpose for ritual occasions and, therefore, do not require the spiritual oversight of institutional leaders. Instead, *puthi-pora* is organised by ordinary people, whenever they have the time and inclination to do so. The *puthi*-readers, similarly, are ordinary members of their communities—men and women, without requisite spiritual status or specific musical training. They are non-professionals, whose desire to read is not primarily for financial reward (for remuneration is not assured), but based on their conviction that *puthis* have inherent value and need to be heard and understood. In all these ways, *puthi-pora* in its Muslim context parallels the Hindu context absolutely—that is, apart from the element of worship which characterises Hindu tradition and can affect some performance occasions, their settings, and repertory. These differences do not undermine the hypothesis, however. They simply indicate that some aspects of the performance context needed to be adapted in order to be consistent with the content of the 'Islamic [literary] substitute'. Such changes were no doubt gradual. But it was the foresight and commitment of the cultural mediators, in adopting a 'pre-existing non-Muslim tradition' as a vehicle for communication which was already so integral to the

lives of ordinary Bengali Muslims (men, women and children), that enabled Islam to penetrate so widely and deeply in its initial phase, and which laid a foundation for the greater changes which came with the reform movements.

As we saw in chapter 1, however, the reformers were not ultimately successful in undermining the syncretistic tradition. This is evident in the continued performance of the 'esoteric' *puthi*-literature which perpetuate its beliefs and practices (albeit more covertly now than before). They were instrumental in achieving a sharpening of pan-Islamic consciousness, though, which is reflected in the 'mainstream' *puthi*-literature. As we saw in chapter 4, the 'mainstream' *puthis* constitute the bulk of the *puthi-poṛa* repertoire today, exemplified by works like Sadek Ali's *Halotun Nobī* and *Mohobbot Nama*. We see in *puthis* such as these, the Islamising of language and style, and the use of the Sylheti-Nagri script which was understood to be more compatible with Islamic ideals than Bengali. Even so, the poetic metres used in the composition of these *puthis*—*poyar* and *tripodī*—are no different from those used in the syncretistic *puthis*, or *moṅgol-kabýo*, literature. And, even though the performance-style may also have been somewhat Islamised, either in the reformist period or before, purged of certain pre-Islamic elements such as dance and musical accompaniment (referred to in Roy's [1983:87-8] description in chapter 1), its most essential characteristic, that of 'reading melodically', has persisted. This was confirmed by the analysis of *poyar* and *tripodī* tunes in chapter 5: that despite the efforts of the reformers, *puthi-poṛa* in its Muslim expression today remains musically Bengali.

An understanding of the history of Islamisation in Bengal helps us to see how *puthi-poṛa* in 'its present shape' was 'subject to [historical] processes of transmission, change, and re-generation'; how and why a 'pre-existing non-Muslim tradition' could become a Muslim tradition and be adapted in such ways as to be used as an acceptable vehicle for Islamisation in two quite opposed historical phases. Essentially, it explains why *puthi-poṛa* exists in its Muslim expression today as it does, and suggests reasons for the existence of layers that expose the remnants of past processes. This is clearly significant in giving us a more complete understanding of the tradition in 'its present shape', but its significance is compounded when we see that *puthi-poṛa* in 'its present shape' actually represents an 'extension of [specific] historical processes' which can shed light on, and enrich our understanding of, history itself. For, by studying *puthi-poṛa* events as historical documents, in attempting to understand the historical

relevance of ethnographic details, we have learned something of what it *is* about *this* contemporary tradition that would have made it such a powerful vehicle for communicating Islam in the past. Although the hypothesis cannot be proved absolutely, the empirical evidence is strong. At very least, knowledge of *puthi-pora* in 'its present shape' adds texture to our understanding of the mechanics of the processes involved—*how* Islam was able to spread so widely and so deeply in Bengal, thus demystifying the mystery.

This study resonates with the assertion that 'historical enquiry' is 'an essential part of ethnomusicology as a whole' (Widdess 1986:1). It agrees that the 'synchronic perspective is an illusion' and that the 'diachronic perspective' should be a part of the study of all musical traditions. It suggests, however, that the relevance of historical enquiry in ethnomusicology can go beyond augmenting our understanding of specific musical traditions, beyond even tracing the historical development of musical form in present musical performance, as relevant and significant as such applications are. This thesis has shown that by viewing musical performances as historical documents, it is possible to learn about the historical processes and religious movements that produced them. But it is more than just *hearing* 'history in the notes'. The performance context is a way of *seeing* history, and the performance content, embodied in its repertoire, is a way of *reading* it.

But *puthi-pora* was surely just *one* way in which Islam spread and took root in Bengal. Those esoteric *puthis*, not considered part of the *puthi-pora* repertoire—those consisting of compilations of lyrical songs and eclectic genres—are, nevertheless, part of the Muslim Bengali literature used in the Islamisation process. A study, at least the parallel of this one, needs to be conducted on the performance of these *puthis*, both to understand the context of their performance (for its own sake) and to understand their contribution to Islamisation in Bengal, but also to know how their performance should be defined (if it cannot be described as *puthi-pora* as this study suggests). Beyond the specific avenues of this study, however, my attempt to answer a historical question by doing contemporary fieldwork, suggests that 'historical ethnomusicology' need not be construed as a study of what exists in dusty archives or in memories of the past (even though these surely have their place). Rather, one can consciously view the process of ethnography as a way not only of knowing the present, but of knowing the past too. It would be interesting to see how other historical enquires could be enriched, at least in

part, by conducting an ethnomusicological study. The application of schema theory in this thesis indicates how this can be done.

### *The Methods Used: Summary and Implications*

Testing my hypothesis depended both on having 'historical documents' to study and a method for analysing them. Thus, how I approached my fieldwork, and how I came to understand the data I gathered, would impact not just what I would represent of *puthi-pora* ethnographically, but how I would understand its historical significance. But, if it is now widely recognised that ethnography 'is produced as much by how we write as by the processes of data collection and analysis' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 239), it is important that the writing be as transparent as possible—for 'ethnographers construct...accounts of the social world...rather than those accounts simply mirroring reality.' 'It is equally important', say Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:256), 'that the ethnography...display and demonstrate...its methodological and empirical claims', so that their 'adequacy' can be evaluated. In constructing my account of *puthi-pora*, this is what I have consciously attempted to do.

The introduction presented a 'natural history' of my research. It explained how its focus evolved from a general study of 'Sylheti music' to a specific, historical ethnomusicological study, how the thesis hypothesis was generated, why I focused on *puthi-pora* in Sylhet, how I approached data collection, and what methods I employed to analyse that data. Through an evaluation and discussion of the existing literature, chapter 1 exposed ethnographic and historical 'gaps': it demonstrated how I made connections between *puthi-pora*, the Muslim Bengali literature and Islamisation in Bengal in developing the hypothesis, and showed how an ethnographic focus might shed light on the historical question.

Chapter 2 displayed and demonstrated the methods I used to determine which specific details would be considered across all *puthi-pora* events in order to construct my general understanding of the tradition. By combining the suggestions of Barz and Hammersley and Atkinson, I included my fieldnotes and the fieldnotes of my research assistant, Nazrul, in the chapter itself. These fieldnotes—literal documents of texted experience—constituted the data, generated from our observations of a specific *puthi-pora* event, to which I applied the schema concept as my analytical tool. As fieldnotes 'affect perception, memory, and interpretation and are a part of an individual's way of

knowing' (Barz 1997:45), including them in the thesis as they are—largely *in toto*—is one way of revealing one's experience at the time (or shortly thereafter), and of displaying the foundations on which later claims are built. The process of locating categories and schemas from fieldnote accounts—which resulted in the construction of four thematic groups, represented in connected schematic diagrams—displayed and demonstrated how I applied the schema concept specifically in the analysis of a single performance event. These schematic diagrams formed a framework for comparing all of my and Nazrul's experiences of *puthi-pora* (alongside the data from my interviews with the *puthi*-readers), and created a platform for discussing the historical question. This was the basis for my writing in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 5 displayed and demonstrated a different analytical application of the schema concept—the construction of melodic schemas. These melodic schemas were constructed to meet two specific aims: to define what 'reading melodically' is etically (by analysing individual tunes), and to consider whether specific *puthis* are read with specific tunes as the *puthi*-readers claimed (by comparing them). Unlike the texts, the tunes used to read the *puthis* are not written—they exist orally. Conventional notation is not able to represent the kind of variables that exist in tunes like these, nor can it reveal the cognitive processes used to generate them. In contrast, the melodic schemas do accommodate the variables that exist in a concise form, and represent generalised abstract models of what each *puthi*-reader *may* have had in his mind when he came to read the different sections of his *puthi*-texts. As these schemas are *abstract* models of tunes, representing only what is similar in their repeated use, they are able clearly to display features that are most characteristic of individual melodies—pitch intervals and contour (Snyder 2000:149). This helped to focus the analysis of individual *pojar* and *tripodī* tunes, and to provide a format for their comparison, based on what is most essential.

These two applications of schema theory—used in the analysis of performance and melody—demonstrate the value of a cognitive approach in ethnomusicology. Not only is it a complementary epistemological tool for analysing reflexive ethnographies (providing a conceptual foundation for describing what we know and how we came to know it), it is an extremely useful way to explain and represent the processes involved in the performance of music in oral traditions (providing a conceptual foundation for describing how performers re-create music in the process of performance). This study

is timely, for it coincides with current thinking both in ethnomusicology generally and in the study of South Asian music specifically. In a paper discussing "Orality, writing and music in South Asia", given at the Open University in May 2007, Widdess (2007: 11-2) stated that 'The performance of music in an oral tradition is highly schematic, not only in its organization of sounds but in its relationship to the social and cultural context in which it is embedded.' The use of schema theory in this thesis has not only shown this to be true, but has provided concrete examples of how it can be applied in the analysis of both.

My use of schema theory has been necessarily specific, but the concept itself is extremely flexible. It has the potential to be applied to any number of narrow or broad ethnomusicological pursuits. 'Since Parry and Lord's seminal work on the oral origins of the Homeric epics,' comments Widdess (2007:3) in the same paper, 'the concept of orality has been associated mainly with the composition and performance, without writing, of verbal texts.' He goes on:

A few writers, such as the musicologist Leo Treitler, have applied aspects of the oral theory to music, but no-one has taken up the challenge of Albert Lord's book *The Singer of Tales* by writing a similar book on *The Singer of Songs* or *The Player of Tunes*. And yet the parallels between oral literature and music seem to be more than skin deep.

As the parallels between oral literature and music *are* clearly more than skin deep, it will be interesting to see whether schema theory, or other cognitive theories, will have an impact on how the performance of music in oral traditions is analysed, represented and understood. Indeed, it will be interesting to see how broadly such theories can be applied. For now, the challenge of writing *The Singer of Songs* remains. But what has been presented here may constitute a beginning towards that work.

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